

DAY BOY COLOURS

HAROLD AVERY





Brechin High SCHOOL,

Class, *Sen. III.*

1st

PRIZE

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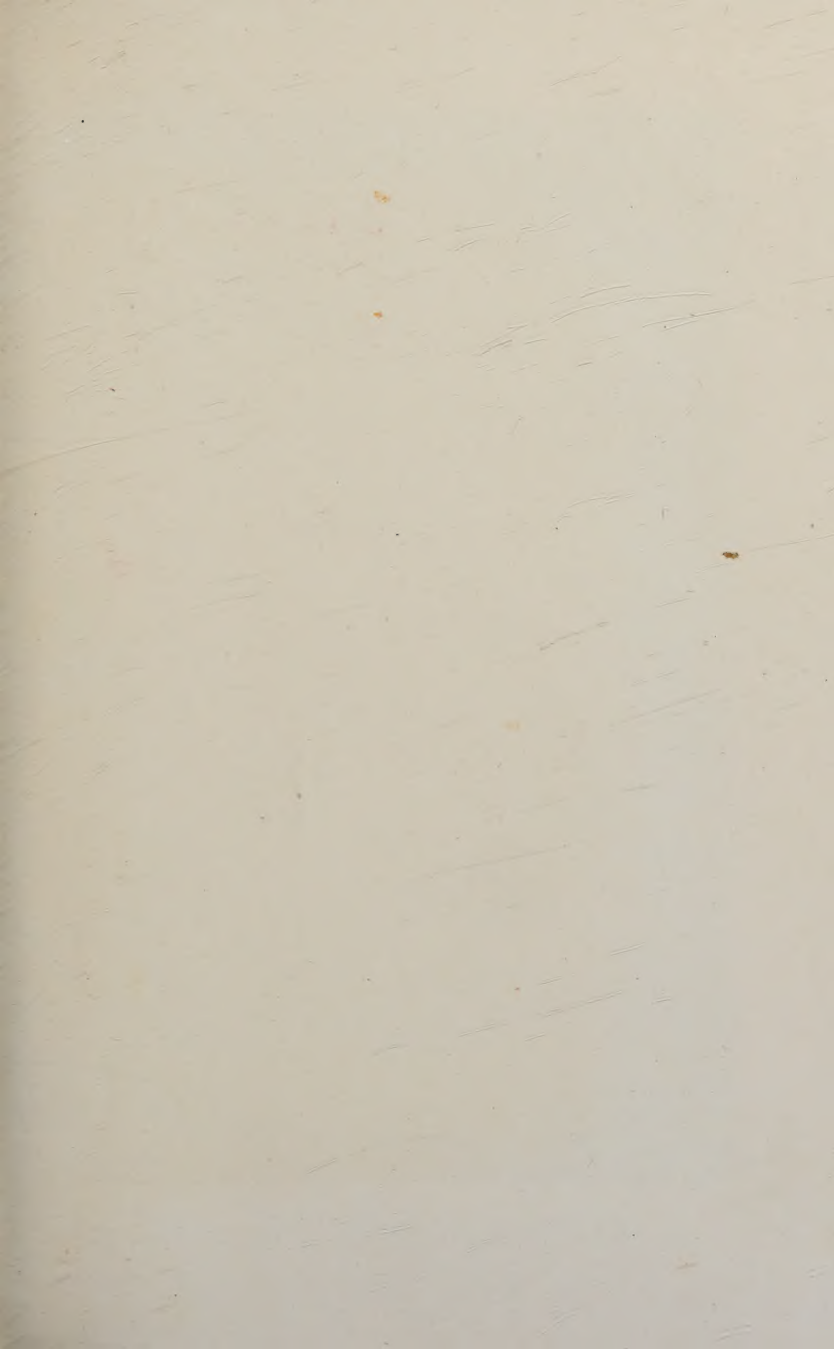
Gordon Lamb

for

General Excellence

J. A. Mann Headmaster

June 19 *24*





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"I believe there's some one in this wood" (p. 197)

DAY BOY COLOURS

By
HAROLD AVERY



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DAY-BOY COLOURS



CHAPTER I

A TRIAL FLIGHT

"IT strikes me he isn't coming," muttered Hugh Denston.

"He'll come if he said he would," answered Joan. "Perhaps there's been a breakdown."

The brother and sister were awaiting the arrival of their cousin, Martin Grane, who had promised to call in after dinner to show them a model aeroplane he had been making. They were standing beside a tennis lawn, from which the net had been removed ages ago, since it was now the third week in November. Joan turned, and her wandering gaze was attracted by a brick wall, the sight of which seemed to put some fresh thought into her head.

"It does seem a shame," she murmured.

"What's a shame?" asked Hugh.

"Why, that the garden next door should have been allowed to get into the state it's in now. You said your-

self it was a jolly old jungle. I wish some really nice people would come to live at Netherby. I wonder why it has been standing empty so long."

"Oh, after old Mrs. Kingston died there was some legal dispute, and I believe the lawyers haven't yet been able to decide to whom the property really belongs. Knowle, the Estate Agent, has charge of it in the meantime. I don't suppose he's had instructions to pay wages for a gardener to keep the place in order, so it's been left to run wild."

"I wish some one would come to live there."

"I'm quite satisfied," laughed Hugh. "If the house was occupied, whenever we wanted to search for a lost ball we should have to ask permission; now we can just scoot round whenever we like."

"You are the person who is always slogging balls over the wall," said Joan. "You'll have to be more careful next summer."

"Why?"

"Didn't you hear what father was saying at dinner? Mr. Knowle told him that there had been a lot of apples in that garden back in September, but some thief must have come in the night and stripped every tree."

"Well, it wasn't my doing."

"No, but Mr. Knowle's in a rage about it, and says if ever he catches people trespassing in the Netherby garden he'll have them prosecuted. I think he means to keep a stricter watch on the place, so in future it won't be safe for you and Martin to go there hunting for lost balls. We shall have to stick up some wire netting——"

"Get away!" interrupted Hugh. "I'll bet you—hullo, here he comes."

The sound of running feet grew louder, and a moment later Martin Grane appeared in sight, speeding down the

gravel path. A bundle of school books was tucked under one arm, and in his right hand he carried the model aeroplane.

"Sorry if I've kept you waiting," he panted, as he came to a halt.

Hugh and Joan stepped forward to inspect the model. The two boys had only a month's difference in age between them, each of them having celebrated a fourteenth birthday during the previous Easter holidays ; their caps were those of the Felchester King's School, which they attended as day-boys. Joan was a year younger than her brother ; her hat-band showing that she was a pupil at St. Catharine's College for girls.

"You are a brainy person, Martin," she laughed ; "always making things. Some day you'll come along with some grand new invention which will be patented all over the world, and bring you pots of money."

"Hurry up," murmured Hugh, glancing at his watch. "We haven't too much time."

"How far will it go ? " asked Joan, with her eyes still on the model. "If we stood out in the road, would it fly from your front gate to ours ? "

"That's over a hundred yards, so I don't suppose it would," was the reply. "It ought to travel the length of this lawn."

"Well, make haste," urged Hugh. "By the way, you can't take it to school ; you'd better leave it in our summer-house. You can come in and pick it up on your way home."

There was no time to lose, and the trio hurried to one end of the tennis lawn. Martin tossed his bundle of books down on an iron seat, and turned the propeller of his plane till the elastic spring was wound to the last twist.

"Here goes!" he cried, and at the same time launched his model into the air.

The trial seemed likely to prove a great success. The aeroplane soared off across the lawn, rising high in the air like a big bird. Then, as if to assist in making this a record flight, a stiff breeze swept over the lawn.

"My hat! look at her now!" gasped Hugh.

The plane showed no sign of coming down on the tennis lawn. Carried by the wind as much as by the drive of its own propeller it travelled on high above the expanse of turf, over a gravel path and a flower bed, then as it began to sink it cleared the ten-foot brick wall and disappeared from view.

"Oh goodness, it's fallen somewhere in the jungle!" exclaimed Joan.

"Bother!" growled Martin. "Never mind, I'll soon find it."

He made a move as if about to start off in search of the lost model, but Hugh caught him by the arm.

"You can't go hunting for it now, man; there's no time. If we aren't jolly quick we shall be late."

"All right, I'll get it when we come back."

"It'll be dark by tea-time," said Joan.

"That doesn't matter; I'll find it. I know just where it fell."

"I don't think you boys ought to go wandering about in that garden," began Joan. "You'd get into a row if any one found you there. Father was telling us at dinner——"

"Oh, *come on!*" shouted Hugh; "there'll be row enough if we stand here talking any longer."

Martin turned to the iron seat, and caught up his bundle of books; all three scampered up the path, and a few seconds later were hurrying down the Falcon Road.

Not a word was spoken till they reached a cross-roads, where the two boys parted company with Joan.

"Good-bye," she cried, as she turned off in the direction of St. Catharine's College; then came a parting hail called back over her shoulder: "You'd better be careful—remember what I said."

"She seems quite worried about us," laughed Martin. "Got a fit of the jumps, eh?"

"If she's got a fit of anything it's indigestion," scoffed Hugh. "She eats too fast."

Martin rather doubted if this explanation of Joan's anxiety was correct, but her warning seemed of little importance, and was soon forgotten. His thoughts turned to the trial flight of his aeroplane; he wondered if the model would be better with a larger propeller, and was still revolving this question in his mind when he caught sight of a class-mate named Maple, who turned out of a by-road some fifty yards ahead. Hearing footsteps he looked round, and slackened his pace till overtaken by the two cousins, when all three fell into step and swung along side by side.

"What's the trouble?" inquired Maple.

"Why, we shall all be late if we don't stick it on," growled Hugh. "The town clocks will be striking in another minute."

"We shall do it all right; your watch must be fast," was the reply. "I wondered if either of you know the meaning of that notice; looks as if we were all to be made toe the line."

"What notice?" asked Martin.

"I suppose you sloped off to dinner before Winter put it on the board," continued Maple. "I just had a glance at it as I came away. There's to be a meeting of the day-boys after school. It didn't say why, and

that seems a bit fishy—made me think there must be trouble in the wind.”

“Get away!” scoffed Hugh. “I expect it’s something to do with footer. Look alive, you chaps; I believe my watch is right. We’d better do a ‘double’!”

They broke into a steady trot, and jogged along in silence. Much to their relief the bell for afternoon school began to ring as they passed through the arched gateway into the quad, where they joined a crowd moving in the direction of the Big School. Martin hopped up the stone steps of the porch, then paused a moment to glance at the big notice-board. He had no difficulty in finding the announcement of which Maple had been speaking. It was written in a bold hand on a half-sheet of notepaper, and was signed J. H. Winter. All day-boys were required to attend a meeting to be held in the gymnasium at the close of afternoon school.

Of whatever business was to be discussed no hint was given. There was nothing but the curt command which every day-boy was bound to obey. Martin turned away from the board with a puzzled look.

“Wonder what that means,” he muttered.

CHAPTER II

NO JOKE

TWILIGHT was falling when the day's work at the King's School came to an end, and by the time Hugh and Martin joined the crowd in the gymnasium the place was in semi-darkness. It was difficult to distinguish faces in the gloom, but the air was filled with a murmur of voices all asking the same question, to which no one seemed able to give a reply. Why had the meeting been called?

For two minutes the hubbub continued, then there was a hush as a big burly figure strode in from the quad. This was Winter, highly popular both as captain of the day-boys and skipper of the School Fifteen. He closed the door with a bang, then fished a box of matches out of his pocket and lit the gas.

"That's better," he said gruffly. "Now we can see what we're about."

The great man marched up the room, then hopped lightly on to a big wooden chest in which boxing gloves and fencing masks were stored. There was a shuffle of feet as the crowd formed a rough semicircle round this improvised platform.

Winter produced a notebook and pencil from his pocket.

"Silence," he called. "Answer to your names."

He proceeded to call the roll of day-boys, the only one

who failed to reply being a youngster who was known to be at home in bed recovering from an illness. Winter closed his notebook with a snap. He could be trusted not to waste time, and he came straight to business.

"The Head told me to call this meeting as there's a matter about which he wishes an inquiry to be made. Did any of you go fooling about on the railway last night and stop a train?"

The question was so amazing that many of the listeners thought it must have been put in jest. There was a silence, then a small boy giggled, and the next moment half the crowd were laughing.

"Oh, you needn't think I'm trying to be funny," snapped Winter. "Did any of you put fog-signals on the line about nine o'clock? Does any one know anything about it?"

A general shaking of heads was the only reply. All merriment ceased as it became evident from the look on Winter's face that he was not in a mood to stand any nonsense.

"I'd better tell you what happened," he began. "At the time I mentioned a man called Priest, who used to be one of the out-porters at the station, was going along Chelfield Road when he passed a boy who he declares was wearing the King's School cap. Priest was able to recognize it because there was a gas-lamp not far away.

"This fellow was standing close to the fence with his back to the footpath, and appeared to be watching two other fellows who were half-way up the railway embankment. Priest thought that they might be searching for a ball they'd lost. He'd not gone more than thirty yards when a train came along. There was a *bang-bang*, then the grinding of brakes as the engine-driver brought the train to a stand."



"He appeared to be watching two other fellows."

"Was there a fog?" asked a voice.

"No, the night was clear. Priest turned and saw this fellow from the King's School dash off, followed by the pair who'd been on the embankment. He guessed at once they'd been putting detonators on the line. He's a bit lame now—that's why he had to give up his job as out-porter—so he couldn't chase after these chaps. But he walked to the station, and reported what he'd seen."

Close to Hugh and Martin stood Ludmoor, a class-mate in the Lower Fifth, who, had he chosen to make better use of his brains, should have been higher in the school. The fact that he was unable to submit even to

the discipline of the playing-field made him of little use at games, but rather than feel himself overlooked as a person of no account whatever, it was his habit to pose as a reckless dog inclined to deeds of daring which required more pluck than football or cricket.

"The school cap doesn't prove anything," called out Ludmoor.

"What d'you mean?" demanded Winter.

"Well, it doesn't prove that the fellow Priest says he saw wearing a school cap was a day-boy. He might have been one of the boarders."

"The roll was called in all the houses at nine o'clock and there were no absentees," was the reply. "The stationmaster came round this morning to speak to Mr. Alwing. He said he didn't wish to press the matter, as he'd only what Priest had told him to go upon, but he thought it would be well for some warning to be given in case these jokers had it in their minds to play the same trick again."

The speaker paused, whereupon a tall, cadaverous-looking member of the Sixth, whose features were adorned with a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, seized the chance to take an innings. Russell could never remain silent through a meeting of the school debating society; he was constantly rising to his feet, though as often as not his remarks were concluded amid peals of laughter.

"I suppose it never struck Priest that the bang was made by the ball."

Russell turned and beamed upon the audience as if expecting them to give him a clap for having scored one point already.

"The ball?" growled Winter. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I mean that it wasn't a fog-signal," began Russell,

with the air of a barrister about to open the case for the defence. "To my mind it's quite clear that what happened was this: Priest says he saw three fellows kick a ball on to the line, and before they could get it back along came a train. The ball was lying on the metals, and when the engine wheel went over it the blessed thing exploded. That's what made the bang."

"Nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense. It's just what you might expect. Supposing you dropped a football in the road, and a traction engine went over it. When it burst it would sound like a gun. Of course it would."

"There's no need to suppose anything of the kind," returned Winter impatiently. "What Priest said was that when he first saw those fellows on the embankment he fancied they might be searching for a ball they'd been kicking about in the road; later he realized what they'd been doing. There were two explosions, and they were made by detonators."

"I'm still inclined to think it might have been done by the bursting of a ball," persisted Russell. "But if, for the sake of argument, you allow that the row was made by fog-signals, Priest can't swear that he actually saw one of those fellows put them on the line. It might have been done by a plate-layer."

"If those chaps hadn't done it, there'd have been no need for them to run away. It's no joke to stop a train—it might cause an accident. Any one who was idiot enough to do such a thing might find himself hauled up before the magistrates."

"How could any schoolboy have got hold of such things as detonators?" asked Turrel, a member of the Upper Fifth. "You can't buy them in a shop."

"No, I suppose you can't; but the fact remains that

these fellows had such things in their possession, and put them on the line."

"Well, I didn't do it," declared a small boy stoutly, his avowal being followed by a shout of laughter.

"Be quiet!" ordered Winter. "Now—did any of you go along Chelfield Road last night?"

There was a turning of heads, but no one spoke.

"Have you ever heard any fellow say that he'd got hold of some railway fog-signals, or seen him messing about with such a thing?"

"You can't get them," said Turrel. "Nobody can unless he's something to do with the railway."

"Listen to me," cried Winter. "Once more—were any of you fooling about on the line when that train was brought to a stand?"

"No," was the loud reply, shouted by at least a dozen different voices.

"Well, that's all I have to say."

In the act of stepping down from the chest Winter paused to give his listeners a final caution.

"You fellows had better be careful what you're about. The Head seems inclined to think some of the day-boys run wild when they are off the school premises. For my own part, I can't believe there's a man among you who would do such a senseless thing as to stop a train. Any fellow playing games of that kind would stand a jolly good chance of being fired out of the school."

The speaker jumped down from his platform, and so the inquiry came to an end. Russell attempted to start some fresh argument, but his voice was drowned in the babel of sound as the crowd dispersed. On leaving the gym most of the day-boys lost no time in starting for home, but a number of them lingered in the quad to exchange opinions.

"What d'you think of that for a yarn?" inquired Maple.

"It's rot!" cried a shrill voice. "Next thing we shall be told will be that some of the King's School boys have tried to set the Town Hall on fire."

"Why should old Priest try to get us into a row?" growled Harley, who had recently been awarded his colours for the Second Fifteen. "Next time he comes telling tales of that kind to the Head he ought to be booted off the place."

"He didn't come to Alwing," corrected Martin Grane. "He told the stationmaster."

"Well, it comes to the same thing. Priest must have got his knife into us for some reason or other. Maybe he's vexed because he doesn't get the tips now that the fellows used to give him when he was out-porter."

Ludmoor approached the group. His arm was crooked and his fist clenched as if he were holding a revolver.

"Now then, you train wreckers," he cried. "Hands up!"

"Don't shoot!" laughed Maple. "Look here, my boy, was it you who put those crackers on the line?"

"Me! I like that," protested Ludmoor, though in a tone which told he was quite pleased that any one should think him capable of such a daring exploit. "No fear—I'm not quite mad. Anyway, I've got sense enough not to put crackers on the line and stop a train."

In the gathering darkness Winter came striding across the gravel, jingling a bunch of keys, with one of which he had just locked the door of the gym. As he came level with the group of day-boys he slackened speed.

"You fellows had better clear off," he called. "Don't stand about asking for trouble; you'll get it if the Head hears you kicking up a row."

For a moment the crowd hung in the wind as if reluctant to take the skipper's advice, then Harley swung round on his heel.

"No sense in staying here any longer," he muttered.
"Come on, you fellows ; I want my tea."

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE ADVENTURE

"I HATE this time of the year," said Hugh, as he and Martin passed out through the school gateway into the gas-lit street. "It's dark before you get home."

"We're within a month of the shortest day, and it seems to have got dark earlier than usual because we were kept so long jawing in the gym."

"Beastly nuisance," growled Hugh. "I say, d'you think it was Ludmoor who played that trick?"

"Oh, bless you, no. What put that idea into your head?"

"It's just the sort of mad thing he would do."

"Not he!" scoffed Martin, who was a better judge of character than his cousin. "Ludmoor likes to make out he's afraid of nothing, but it's all swank. He'd funk any big risk, you may be sure he would. Besides, the chap isn't such an utter fool as to put detonators on the line. There's no fun in a railway accident, and that's what might happen through some idiot stopping a train. Serve him right if he was sent to prison."

For a few moments Hugh walked on, wondering if any of his school-fellows could possibly be guilty of such a stupid and dangerous act.

"It's put the Head's back up," he muttered. "D'you think he'll keep all the day-boys in for extra school?"

"I don't suppose it's as bad as that. I doubt if

Alwing himself really believes it was done by three fellows from the King's School. He promised the stationmaster that an inquiry should be made, and the bother will blow over in time. It's not likely there'll be any fresh complaint that some chap has been playing the fool."

The two boys hurried along, now and again exchanging some casual remark about their home-work, and the prospect of their both being moved up into a higher Form after Christmas. When at length they reached Falcon Road, and were preparing to wish each other good-night, Martin's thoughts suddenly switched back to the trial flight of his new model.

"Look here," he said, "when we pass Netherby I'll dodge round into the garden, and get that plane of mine."

"We're late already," objected Hugh. "Leave it till to-morrow."

"It might rain in the night, and I don't want the thing to get soaking wet."

"You can't find it now; it's too dark."

"Oh yes, I can. It's white, easily seen; and I know just about where it fell."

Five seconds later the pair came to a halt, now standing outside a big front gate which opened on the carriage drive of the empty house. Falcon Road was silent and deserted; not a footstep could be heard. It might have been supposed that it was late at night instead of tea-time, and that all the inmates of the neighbouring dwellings had retired to bed.

"Come on," murmured Martin, laying his hand on the latch of the gate. "There's no one about."

Hugh was not lacking in pluck, but for some reason difficult to explain he felt nervous. The words Winter

had spoken in the gym, warning the day-boys to keep out of trouble, were still fresh in his mind.

"Better not," he advised; "we might get into a row."

"Get away; who's going to kick up a row?"

"Knowle might. He's angry because some thief came one night and stripped all the apples off the trees in that garden. He told father he meant to keep a stricter watch on the place in future, and that if he caught any trespassers he'd have them prosecuted."

"Fiddlesticks!" replied Martin. "There's no fruit on those trees now for any one to steal."

He opened the gate, and the pair walked slowly up the gravel drive, their feet swishing through drifts of dead leaves which had fallen from the trees. They reached the broad sweep in front of the house, and paused, gazing at its shuttered windows. Not the faintest gleam of light came from any of them. There was no sign of any caretaker living on the premises, and it was not likely that a man would be employed to come every night and keep watch on a garden which, at this time of the year, contained nothing worth stealing. Yet Hugh could not shake off the feeling that they were in danger of being taken by surprise.

"I should think this place will need some doing up to make it habitable for a fresh tenant," said Martin. "Houses always fall out of repair when they are left standing empty for long."

Hugh moved nearer to his companion, and in so doing nearly lost his balance as he trod on something which rolled beneath his foot. He stooped down, and picked up what he imagined must be a large stone; then his sense of touch told him he was mistaken.

"Found something?" inquired Martin. "What is it?"

"I don't know; feels like a wooden Teddy-bear. Some kids must have been larking round here, and dropped one of their toys. I'll have a look at it under the gas-lamp when we get back into the road."

As he spoke Hugh thrust his find into one of the side pockets of his overcoat, then, feeling he had gone too far to turn back, followed his companion along a bend of the drive which led round the house, and branched off to a coach-house and stable-yard. A side path gave entrance to the garden.

"Hist!" whispered Hugh suddenly, and came to a stop.

"What's the matter?"

"Hush, can't you hear voices?"

The pair stood listening, but not a sound broke the stillness.

"Your nerves seem all on edge," Martin chuckled. "It strikes me you need a tonic."

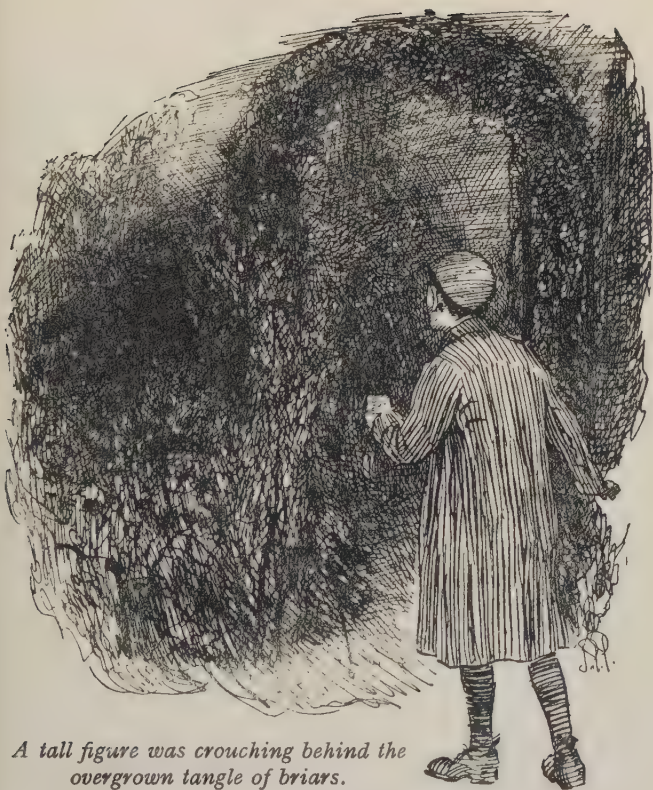
"I'm all right," snapped the other. "But I could have sworn I heard two people talking in low tones over there by the stable-yard."

Martin turned his head in the direction indicated, and stood for several seconds straining his ears.

"It's all quiet," he murmured. "You may have heard some one going down the back lane. Sounds carry a long way on a still night like this, though I didn't hear anything."

Both boys knew the Netherby garden quite well, as they had often roamed about it when searching for a lost tennis-ball. They hurried on till they reached a broad central pathway.

"Nice thing if it's fallen in the fish-pond," muttered Hugh. "That's where one of our balls went, back in the summer."



A tall figure was crouching behind the overgrown tangle of briars.

"Oh, it didn't go that way. I expect we shall find it among the gooseberry bushes at the lower end of the vegetable garden."

"Well, you go on, and I'll have a squint at the pond."

They parted company, and in half a minute Hugh had reached the pond. The dull gleam of its surface was broken here and there by masses of weed, but there was no sign of the model aeroplane.

"It's not here," thought Hugh. "Even if it had fallen into the water, I don't suppose it would have sunk."

He walked slowly round the pond, and, as he did so, there grew upon him a vague, instinctive feeling that he was being watched. Yet there was no earthly reason why any one except the two boys should be [prowling about in the "jungle" at that time of day; a person who had obtained an order from the Estate Agent to view the property would not come to do so after dark. Hugh picked up a pebble and tossed it into the pond.

Plop!

The sound was followed by a faint rustle as if the fall of the stone had disturbed some bird roosting in one of the neighbouring bushes. The boy listened, then gave a clap with his hands, half expecting to flush another bird, but all was still.

Hugh waited a moment, then retraced his steps to the main path, which was spanned by a rustic arch through which he had to pass if he meant to follow Martin into the vegetable garden. He was about to give his cousin a hail when he noticed something which set his heart thumping like a sledge hammer. His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, and he was certain that a tall figure was crouching behind the overgrown tangle of rose briars which covered one side of the arch. Whoever this might be, there seemed no room for any doubt as to what was his intention. He was waiting to spring out and make a grab as soon as the boy came within arm's reach.

Once more a vivid recollection of Winter laying down the law in the school gymnasium flashed into Hugh's mind and reduced him to a state of panic. One alarming thought after another raced at lightning speed through his brain. He imagined himself seized, and

later on reported to the Head for trespassing in a private garden in which robbery had already been committed. And Martin—he was bound to be caught unless he made a dash for the bottom of the garden, and scrambled over the wall. He might escape if given a warning.

Hugh was breathless, and it was with some difficulty he found his tongue.

“ Look out ! ” he cried hoarsely. “ Sling your hook ! ”

He had done all he could, and his one thought now was for his own safety. He spun round and dashed off up the path, going like the wind.

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK CAT

ON the football field players of his own age found Hugh a very difficult man to collar ; he could twist and turn like an eel. Now, as he raced off in the darkness, he was holding himself prepared to dodge the instant an attempt was made to take him prisoner. It was not before he had rounded the empty house and was half-way down the drive that he realized he was not being followed.

"That beggar must have gone after Martin," was the thought which flashed through his mind.

He reached the front gate, and came to a halt. For a moment he was troubled with a sense of having deserted his cousin, but if he had attempted to dash past the enemy, and join forces with Martin in the vegetable garden, it would only have made escape more difficult, and in all probability they would both have been caught.

Hugh listened, but the far-away honk of a motor horn was the only sound he could hear. He passed out through the front gate, then lingered lest some call of distress might come from the distant "jungle."

"Martin's got away—must have shinned over the wall," he pondered. "If that chap had collared him there'd have been a row, and I should have heard their voices."

He was on the point of making a dash for his own garden in the hope of finding his cousin on the safe side of the wall, when he caught the sound of footsteps coming at a leisurely pace down the drive. The watchman must have abandoned the chase and decided that it was useless to remain in ambush any longer.

Wheet! wheet! wheet!

Hugh recognized the whistle; he sprang to the gate, and pushed it open.

"Look alive!" he cried. "Quick!"

"Why are you in such a hurry?" came the reply in Martin's voice. "I found that plane just where I expected. I called, but you didn't answer. What have you been doing?"

In a few breathless sentences Hugh explained the cause of his flight. "Come on," he panted. "If that chap spots us, he'll follow and find out where we live."

"Rats," laughed Martin. "There was no one in that garden but you and me."

"There *was*, I tell you; I was almost as close to him as I am to you now."

"Get away! My good chap, I came up the middle path and through that arch, so if any one had been hiding behind it he'd have sprung on me as I went by. You got the wind up——"

"I didn't," interrupted Hugh snappishly. "I scooted because if I'd gone any farther I should simply have walked into his arms."

"If you really thought there was some one waiting to pounce on us, you might have given me a friendly whoop, 'stead of which you seem to have hopped off without caring what happened to poor me."

The words were spoken in jest, but they riled Hugh intensely. He had not yet recovered from the shock of

his own narrow escape from capture, and little was needed to fan his temper into a flame.

"I did call," he snarled. "I told you to sling your hook."

"I didn't hear you."

"Well, that was your fault; you should have kept your ears open."

"Don't get excited," laughed Martin. "I can't think what's the matter with you to-night. You're as nervous as a cat. First you kicked up a fuss about going down that garden in the dark, then you fancy you hear mysterious voices, and after that you see a bogey-man hiding in the bushes."

"Oh, shut up!" cried Hugh angrily. "You needn't think I'm going to stand here arguing all night. I'm off."

The end of his book strap was wound round his right hand, and, careless of what he was doing, he gave the bundle a swing, intending to sling it over his shoulder. It struck something in mid-air, and there was a sound like the snapping of dry twigs.

"Look what you've done now!" exclaimed Martin. "Smashed my aeroplane—you silly ass!"

In a calmer moment Hugh would have taken the blame, and said he was sorry; but he had lost control of his temper, and this mishap seemed like something which had been done purposely to increase his vexation.

"Why must you stick the silly thing right under my nose?" he cried. "I don't care if it is broken—it nearly got us both into a beastly row."

"Rubbish! You got the wind up for some reason or other, and now you are trying to make out——"

"I'm not trying to tell lies, so shut up."

Fuming with wrath Hugh turned on his heel and

strode off, quickening his pace as he heard Martin's step behind him. Without so much as a parting "Cheerio" he swung in through his own front gate, and marched on up the drive. A gong was sounding as he reached the house, and he made a dash for the cloakroom to hang up his overcoat and cap.

Hugh ate his tea in silence, but Joan had plenty to say. It seemed that she had been given a small part in a one-act play which the girls at St. Catharine's College were getting up to perform at the breaking-up concert before the Christmas holidays. She described the costume she was to wear, and was eager to know if it could be made at home in time for the dress rehearsal. Hugh refused to show any interest, his brain was busy inventing some smashing replies he might have made to Martin's chaff. When the meal came to an end the two young folks retired to the breakfast-room, which was warmed by a gas fire. Here their home-work was done. Joan put an ink-pot on the table, and settled down to struggle with her first task.

"I can't understand this question," she sighed. "I wish you'd tell me what it means."

"Oh, find out yourself—I expect it's easy enough, only you won't trouble to think."

"Why are you so cross?" asked the girl. "You looked as sour as vinegar all tea-time."

Hugh was eager to unburden his mind, and this was a good opportunity. He knew that his sister was to be trusted, and laying down his pen he gave her a brief and rather one-sided account of his adventure on the way home from school.

"Martin's a fool," he concluded. "He won't believe a word I say; thinks I took fright at nothing, and left him in the soup without caring what became of him."

Joan pondered for a few moments in silence. She was a level-headed young person, and it seemed to her very strange that, if some one had actually been on guard in the Netherby garden, he should have allowed both boys to escape.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Why, this man you've been talking about. Did he call after you when you ran away?"

Though not meant as a taunt, the words "ran away" touched Hugh on a raw spot.

"I didn't give him time to say anything," he snapped.

"Didn't he chase you?"

"He may have started and then turned back; I don't know what became of him—it's a mystery."

"Perhaps Martin was right, and you only thought you saw a man standing by the arch," suggested Joan.

"I suppose you'll think it was all imagination from start to finish, and that I never went inside the place," growled Hugh. "Wait a jiff, and I'll show you something I picked up just outside the house. Then perhaps you'll believe I wasn't simply dreaming."

He rose from his chair and returned a few moments later with the object he had stuffed into his overcoat pocket. It was the image of a black cat, sitting upright with a comical turn of its head. The figure was cleverly carved in some hard wood, with a pair of yellow glass eyes, and a bow of bright green ribbon tied round its neck.

"What a queer thing," murmured Joan. "Where did it come from, I wonder?"

"Oh, some kid must have been fooling round that house, and dropped it in the drive."

"I don't think it's a toy; it looks to me more like an

ornament—same sort of thing as those black elephants on the dining-room chimney-piece at Aunt Margaret's."

Hugh dropped into his chair, and examined the image more closely. He was inclined now to accept Joan's opinion as correct. The cat had not come from a toy shop; it was a clever caricature of the real animal; the expression of its face, and the attitude of its body, could not have been produced by any one who was not an artist highly skilled in the use of wood-carving tools.

"It looks a bit weird, but black cats are supposed to bring luck."

Hugh ceased speaking, and whipped the image off the table on to his lap. He had caught the sound of footsteps in the hall, but they passed the breakfast-room door, and died away into silence.

"That's the guv'nor, and I thought he was coming in here to get a book," explained Hugh with a grin, as he replaced the cat on the table. "Better for him not to see this joker. He'd want to know where I got it, and he might be a bit ratty if he found out that Martin and I had been fooling about in the Netherby garden this evening after what he said at dinner to-day."

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Joan. "Seems to me you ought to give it back to the person to whom it belongs."

"How can I do that when I haven't the least idea where it came from? It's not my fault if people chuck their ornaments about. I don't want the beastly thing; I'll cut up the drive next door on the way to school to-morrow, and drop it at the same place where I picked it up. Then, if the owner chooses to come and search, he'll get it again."

"Good idea," agreed Joan. "Meantime, if you don't want father to see it, you'd better not leave it lying about."

Hugh leant back in his chair, and gazed thoughtfully round the room. Presently he seemed to have found what he sought.

"I'll stick it away on the top shelf of that bookcase," he decided. "There's plenty of room; it'll be out of sight, and easy to get at when I start for school in the morning."

He dragged his chair across to the bookcase, and stowed the cat away behind a pile of old magazines. In handling them he made a fresh discovery, and jumped down from the chair with a whoop of satisfaction.

"Here's that packet of films we took in the summer holidays and got Wenmouth to develop," he cried, waving a stout green-tinted envelope. "I thought the blessed things were lost, but they must have been stuck away with those magazines. Now we shall be able to get some prints."

"Cheers for the black cat," laughed Joan. "It's brought us a stroke of good luck already."

CHAPTER V

A NARROW ESCAPE

HUGH's first thought on waking next morning was a drowsy recollection of having fallen out with Martin; then, as his brain cleared, he remembered what the quarrel had been about. That he should have been accused of cowardice was what rankled in his heart, and Martin should have known better.

"He called me a funk, and he'll have to take it back if we are to be friends again," growled Hugh as he scrambled out of bed.

He argued the whole thing out while he was dressing. He had urged his cousin not to go into the Netherby garden, and if the latter had taken his advice there would have been no fuss. Then, when he saw the dark figure crouching beside the arch, he had acted as any sensible fellow would have done under the same conditions. What earthly good would it have been for him to have stood still, or walked on through the arch, and so allowed the man to make him prisoner? That he had given an alarm showed that he had not lost his head, and it was beastly mean of Martin to make out he hadn't heard the call. It had been all Martin's fault from start to finish.

So much time was lost while Hugh debated these points with his reflection in the looking-glass that he was late for breakfast. He gobbled his food, collected his school-books, and dashed out of the house, forgetting all about

the black cat, which was left in the hiding-place where it had been stowed overnight. He was determined not to walk to school with Martin that morning, and so was anxious to get a good start. The fellow must be shown that he had gone a lot too far, and that an apology was due before his offence could be forgiven.

Being among the first of the day-boys to arrive at the King's School, Hugh loitered about in the quad with a book in his hand, pretending to be taking a last look at one of his lessons. The trickle of new arrivals increased to a steady stream, and presently Martin came through the entrance gateway walking between two class-mates, Reeves and Pollard. He was giving them a humorous account of a picnic in the summer holidays. All three glanced at Hugh as they passed him by, then laughed aloud as the story came to an end, and for this merriment there seemed only one explanation.

"Sneak!" thought Hugh. "He's been telling them how I bolted out of that garden last night. Now it'll go all over the school that I'm a silly funk."

He might have known better than ever to suppose that such a loyal friend as Martin would hold him up to ridicule, but his own ill-humour made it easy for him to jump to a wrong conclusion. By the time he took his seat in class he was ready to believe that half the fellows in the room had heard the story, and were eyeing him with amused contempt. A whispering which came from the desk behind him helped to confirm this suspicion, and it became a certainty when a ball of paper, thrown with a bad aim in the direction of the waste-paper basket, struck him on the back of the head.

"They've begun it already," thought Hugh. "I'll go for some of them later on, see if I don't."

The fact that Mr. Dolphin, the class-master, had risen that morning suffering from a bad bilious attack helped to bring the barometer down from fair to stormy. He had eaten no breakfast, and his face was the colour of parchment. The trouble began as he marched up the room to his desk ; he trod on what looked like a small black pebble, and it went to pieces beneath his heel with a loud crunch. Mr. Dolphin halted with a look as if some one had dealt him a grievous wound ; he was a very orderly man, and nothing vexed him more than to find that such things as nutshells or bits of orange peel had been scattered about on the floor of his classroom.

"Who's been throwing coke about?" he asked sharply ; then, receiving no reply, "I've told you over and over again that I will not allow any boy to meddle with the stove—hum, where's the box?"

The last question referred to a large iron scuttle which usually stood beside the slow-combustion stove. A voice suggested that it had been taken away by Wood, the school porter, to be refilled. Pollard, who sat near the door, saw a chance of enjoying a few moments' freedom.

"Please, sir, shall I run and find Wood, and ask if he's got it?" he asked cheerfully.

"Certainly not ; the fire's made up, and will last till break."

Mr. Dolphin strode on up the room, sank limply into his chair, and took a book from his desk.

"You seem very energetic this morning, Pollard," he said sourly. "Suppose you begin."

More than one boy groaned inwardly. As a rule, some one on the front bench was called upon to start construing the portion of Livy set for the lesson, a

practice which gave the rearguard a sporting chance of hearing the whole passage rendered into English before they themselves were called upon to attempt translation.

Pollard was good at maths, but as a Latin scholar he was singularly dull, and he came a cropper before he reached the end of the first line. He was ordered to hand the torch to the boy next him, who began with a howler which astonished the whole class. Hampson followed, and rose to his feet wishing he'd never been born. Two minutes later he was bogged completely. Fox, the head boy, who could have gone down the whole page without a stumble, leant back in his seat with a sigh, and gazed out of the window at a passing cloud. He was roused from his reverie with a slight shock.

"Tell him, some one," wailed Mr. Dolphin. "Fox, will you kindly tell him what it means?"

Fox, who was never expecting that the battle would roll suddenly from the back of the room to the front, seized his book, though with no idea how many lines had been done, or of what word or phrase he was to tell Hampson the meaning.

"Yes, sir," he murmured; "hum—er—I didn't quite——"

"No, you've not been attending," snapped Mr. Dolphin. "Upon my word, all you fellows seem to have come into class this morning with the idea of taking some sort of rest cure."

He switched off from the rear rank, and put the front bench on to construe, the result being that work progressed more smoothly, though not without frequent groans of dissatisfaction from Mr. Dolphin, whose temper seemed to be going steadily from bad to worse. Every

one was relieved when the bell rang for the quarter of an hour's break at eleven o'clock.

Hugh strode out into the quad with his fist clenched, and a dour look on his face. He had been scarcely conscious of the storm in the classroom, since it had seemed to him of small importance compared with the tempest raging in his own heart. For any one to try to label him as coward was mean and unjust; the first person who attempted to use the paste-brush would repent so doing.

"I'll go for him," Hugh whispered to himself. "The first chap who comes asking for trouble will get it—whichever he is."

Having, figuratively speaking, cleared for action, it was a disappointment to see no signs of the enemy. He was allowed to wander unmolested about the quad, and not so much as a single grain of chaff came his way. The finger of scorn was no doubt being pointed at him behind his back, but no one came forward to inquire openly how and why he had shown the white feather.

"It's a plot," thought Hugh. "They mean to wait and rag me after school. I'd like to know what sort of a yarn Martin's been telling them—all bosh, I'll be bound."

A wiser person would have tackled Martin straight away, and asked what he was up to, but Hugh had decided that, before he spoke another word to his cousin, the latter must offer some sort of apology. And Martin, though ready enough to forgive the damage done to his aeroplane, saw no reason why he should attempt a peace-making until Hugh had recovered from this fit of the sulks for which there was no reason or excuse.

Break came to an end, and the Lower Fifth returned to their classroom with gloomy forebodings of more trouble. They took their places in silence awaiting the

arrival of Mr. Dolphin. Two minutes went by, and the master's chair still remained empty.

"What's become of little Dolly?" inquired Hampson.

"His works have run down," growled Pollard. "He's winding himself up to give us some more jazz music."

There was a silence, broken by Ludmoor.

"This room's beastly cold," he complained. "Hullo, Wood has brought that scuttle back while we were outside. I vote we put a bit of coke in the stove."

"No, don't do that!" cried Fox. "You'll only make Dolphin ten times worse than he is already. You heard what he said; if he comes in and finds any one meddling with that stove he'll be furious."

Ludmoor seized on what seemed a good opportunity to display his dauntless spirit. Without paying the slightest heed to the head boy's caution he left his seat, dashed across the room, and opened the top of the stove.

"Where's the blooming shovel?" he growled.

Apparently Wood had carried the shovel away inside the empty hod, and left it in the cellar. Ludmoor was determined not to be beaten; he could not blacken his fingers by taking up the coke in handfuls, and the only thing was to pour it into the stove. He seized the big scuttle, but found it far too heavy for him to lift.

"Come on, some one—give me a hand," he cried.

The absurd idea flashed into Hugh's mind that here was a chance for showing the whole class that he was as stout-hearted as any one in the room. Without a moment's hesitation he sprang to Ludmoor's aid, grasped one side of the scuttle, and prepared for a heave.

"Leave that stove alone!" wailed Fox. "Quick—you fools! get back to your desks, or——"

His voice was drowned in a sudden and appalling sound like the roar of an avalanche. Maple afterwards declared that he thought the roof was falling, and for a few moments even Ludmoor and Hugh hardly knew what had happened. Using all their strength they had lifted the heavy scuttle level with the top of the stove, then, with a crack, one of the handles had given way. The two boys staggered, tried to recover their balance, then down they came surrounded by a beach of coke which poured out of the falling scuttle.

The hideous din was followed by a breathless silence as all the class gazed at the horrible sight which in another moment would meet the eye of Mr. Dolphin. There was no shovel—no time to do anything—the situation was hopeless.

“ You two chaps have done it now ! ” gasped Pollard.
“ For goodness’ sake get——”

“ *Cave !* ” interrupted Reeves.

Footsteps, a quick turn of the handle—and the door was flung open.

Into the room stepped—not Mr. Dolphin, but a mere urchin named Drew, who by some miracle of brain power had won his way into the Upper Fourth. He glanced up the room, and at once his lips expanded into a broad grin.

“ Hullo, you fellows,” he chirruped, “ are you making a rock-garden ? ”

“ Ass ! ” hissed Pollard. “ What’s become of Dolphin ?—have you seen him ? ”

“ He’s gone to bed.”

“ GONE TO BED ! ! ”

“ Well, I suppose he has,” replied Drew airily. “ In break he went to the Head to say he was so jolly ill he couldn’t carry on. So you fellows are to bring your

books to the Big School. Naylor sent me to tell you. It's the Head's orders, mind, so look sharp."

The messenger swung round, and had disappeared before the Lower Fifth fully realized their luck. They gave vent to their feelings with a deep sigh of relief. Instead of a terrible hour with Mr. Dolphin, they were to spend the time in the Big School under the eye of Mr. Naylor, who would probably give them some task which would enable him to leave them busy with their pens while he gave his chief attention to his own division—the Upper Fourth.

"Come on!" cried Fox, springing to his feet. "Look here, Ludmoor and Denston," he added breathlessly as he charged down the room, "soon as school's over you must come back and clear up this mess—before any one sees it. D'you understand?"

Hugh and Ludmoor were careful to give Mr. Naylor no trouble, and a few minutes after the Forms had been dismissed, they returned to the classroom, now in possession of the missing shovel and of a broom, both of which had been found in the cellar. They set to work to refill the scuttle, then swept up the dust.

"There, that's all correct," chuckled Ludmoor. "Dolphin himself wouldn't know there had been a spill. My word, when young Drew opened that door I thought we were done in."

Hugh was feeling rather pleased with himself. That senseless attempt to replenish the stove now seemed to him a good joke. Moreover, it must have shown the whole class that he was not lacking in dash and daring.

"Fox nearly had a fit," he said.

"Oh, Fox is a rotter!" replied Ludmoor. "He's afraid of Dolphin—daren't do a thing which might get

him into a row. And most of the other fellows are the same."

The broom was carried back to the cellar, and the two boys started on their journey home for dinner. Though they had rarely spoken to each other in the past, the coke-scuttle mishap seemed to have created a bond of sympathy between them.

"It's lucky for us that Dolphin was obliged to take to his bed," laughed Ludmoor. "It's about the narrowest escape I've ever had."

"Well, between you and me, I had a near shave of getting into a bother last night," said Hugh. "If I hadn't been jolly quick I should have been collared."

He gave a brief account of what had happened in the Netherby garden, taking care to controvert Martin's base suggestion that it had been a false alarm.

"What was the man doing there?" inquired Ludmoor.

"I can't imagine, unless the Estate Agent sent him to have a look round."

"Perhaps he was searching for that wooden image you say you picked up at the top of the drive."

They slackened speed, preparing to part company at the next corner.

"I don't think the cat had anything to do with it," said Hugh. "My sister and I are not quite sure whether it's an ornament or a toy. I'll bring it to school after dinner, and you shall see if you can tell me what it is. So long!"

The afternoon passed without any fresh disturbance. After dismissal Ludmoor lingered in search of a book he had mislaid. When at last he hurried out through the school gates he was rather surprised to find Hugh waiting for him.

"I've got it—that cat I said I'd show you. I didn't want to take it into class, so I left it in my overcoat pocket."

Twilight was falling, but the two boys stepped on a few paces and came to a halt in the glare of an electric light from a shop window. Ludmoor took the image, and examined it with a puzzled smile. He turned it over, tested its weight, and gave the neck a twist to see if it would unscrew and disclose some cavity in the body.

"No, it's a solid piece of wood," he said. "Must be an ornament of some sort; I don't think I ever saw one like it before. What are you going to do with it?"

"Oh, chuck it away—drop it in the same place where I picked it up."

"I shouldn't do that," replied Ludmoor. "I should keep it. Why not?—finding's keeping, so I should hang on to it if I were you."

The attention of both boys being fixed on the cat, they failed to see that it had attracted the notice of a third person. A rough-looking lad who was passing in the blaze from the window caught sight of the image, and pulled up with a jerk. For a moment it seemed as if he was about to spring at Hugh, and snatch the lost treasure from his grasp. Then he turned and stepped across to the other side of the road, where he disappeared in the gathering darkness.

"Well, I might as well keep it, I suppose," said Hugh. "If I find out where it came from, the rightful owner can have it back."

He pushed the cat into his pocket, and by the time he reached Falcon Road he had lost interest in his find. He trudged along thinking of something he meant to do during the Christmas holidays, and unconscious of the fact that he was being followed. Five seconds after

Hugh had turned in at his own front gate, the lad who had dogged his steps paused beside it to read the name of the house.

"Creswick," he muttered; "so that's where he lives. He's got it on him, and according to what he and that other chap were saying he don't know what it is."

The speaker cocked up his head, listened a moment, then opened the gate softly, and stepped inside.

CHAPTER VI

"PEPPER'S GHOST"

HUGH was half-way up the drive when there was a patter of feet, and he saw Joan running towards him.

"I've been waiting for you," she exclaimed. "Thought you were never coming."

"What's the matter?"

"I want you to do something before tea. I've got some wood which will make a lid for that box, if it's sawn off the right length. Then you can nail it down. It's all ready waiting in the workshop. I've lit the lamp, and put the saw, hammer, and nails on the bench."

"Why are you in such a desperate hurry?"

"It must go off to-night, and Sarah says she'll take it to the post while we are at tea."

Among the toys which Joan had outgrown was a doll's tea-set, and this Mrs. Denston had suggested should be sent as a birthday present to the child of an old nurse. Joan had carefully packed the crockery in a wooden box, which, though just the size required, had no lid.

"I've lit the lamp in the workshop," she repeated. "Come on, it'll be done in a few minutes."

"All right," said Hugh, "trot along."

Just beyond the tennis lawn on which Martin's model aeroplane had been tested was a side-path, which led

through some shrubs to a space on which a small shed had been erected, the joint property of Hugh and Joan, and known as the "workshop," though used by them for a number of purposes besides carpentry. It was the place where they developed photos taken with a snapshot camera, or did odd jobs requiring the use of paint or glue, the smell of which might have been objected to in the house. The pair approached their sanctum guided by the light of an oil lamp which shone out through an uncurtained window. On a small carpenter's bench at one end of the shed, Joan had placed the tools ready for her brother's use.

Hugh prepared to take off his overcoat, then changed his mind. It was not worth while when the job would take only a few minutes ; but the movement of his hand brought it into contact with his bulging pocket, and he pulled out the image.

"D'you want to buy a kitten?" he asked carelessly.

"I thought you were going to put it back where you found it," said Joan.

"I know ; but I showed it to one of the fellows coming home from school, and he advised me to stick to it. Seems a shame to chuck it away. It's worth keeping."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm not going to leave it to be picked up by the first person who comes along, but I don't particularly want the blessed thing. You can have it, if you like."

Joan put out her hand to accept the present, then she hesitated.

"You told me you didn't want any one to see it," she murmured.

"If any one asks where it came from, you can say I picked it up. Needn't say where—though I don't sup-

pose it matters. I was afraid, last night, there might be a row because Martin would go fooling round in that garden. But the man didn't trouble to find out who we were, so it's all blown over now."

"Very well, you can give it to me," Joan decided. "We'll keep it here in the workshop for an ornament."

There was something so comical in the black cat's face as it stared up at her with glass eyes that the girl burst out laughing. She tidied its green ribbon, then found a place for it on a shelf beside some bottles and dishes used for developing photos. Hugh stepped to the bench, and picked up a piece of board.

"Is this it?" he inquired; then, receiving no reply, he glanced over his shoulder, and wondered what could be the matter with his sister. She had turned away from the shelf on which the black cat had been placed, and was moving her head from side to side as if viewing herself in a mirror.

"What's up—got a crick in your neck?" asked Hugh.

"Oh, it's nothing," answered Joan, smiling. "D'you remember father telling us of an entertainment he saw when he was a boy called 'Pepper's Ghost'? It must have been the same thing—the bright lamplight, and a sheet of plain glass."

"I don't understand what you are talking about."

"Well, just for a moment I thought I saw some one looking in through the window, and it must have been the reflection of my own face on the glass. I was trying to make it come again, but I suppose I can't get the proper angle."

"Oh, come and show me what you want me to do," replied Hugh impatiently. "We don't want to stay here all night."



"I thought I saw some one looking in through the window."

He measured the board, found the exact length and width required, then reached out his hand for a set-square.

"Got a pencil?" he asked.

Joan shook her head; it was the one thing she had forgotten. Hugh clicked his tongue impatiently, then unbuttoned his coat, and from his waistcoat pocket produced a silver pencil-case which had been given him on his last birthday. It was a possession of which he was rather proud, one that was not intended for use in

the workshop, but he was anxious to get on with the job and not lose time. He ruled his lines, then set to work with the saw ; the first part of his task finished, he put the lid on the box and secured it with some thin wire nails.

" There—that's all right," he announced. " You'd better tie it round with a piece of cord—make it easier for the postman to handle. I'll carry it back to the house if you'll put out the light."

Joan blew out the lamp, then as she groped her way towards the door the wish took her to keep the black cat in her bedroom instead of allowing it to remain as an ornament for the workshop. She stepped aside, felt for the image in the darkness, and took it down from the shelf. Hugh was waiting for her outside the door ; he turned the key, withdrew it from the lock, and slipped it into his pocket.

" Look alive," he grunted. " We shall be late for tea."

Sarah carried off the box, and on her return was able to report that the clerk had told her that the gift would be delivered by the first post in the morning. The two young folks settled down for their usual grind in the breakfast-room, and it was not until their home-work was finished that Joan's thoughts turned to her new possession.

" I say," she began, " I didn't leave that cat in the workshop. I brought it with me, and put it on top of the wardrobe in my bedroom. We'll see if it brings us some good luck."

" How d'you suppose it'll do that ? "

" Can't say—but that's what it may do. You wouldn't have found those films if it hadn't been for the cat. They might have been lost for goodness knows how long."

Hugh shook his head, then leant back in his chair smiling.

" I had a stroke of luck this morning," he chuckled, and gave a brief account of the mishap with the coke-scuttle. " It was a narrow escape," he concluded; " I made sure we were in for a jolly old row. We should have been if Dolphin had been well enough to come back into school."

" What did Martin think about it ? " asked Joan.

Hugh's face clouded with a frown.

" Didn't ask him," he said shortly. " I'm not on friendly terms with that man—haven't spoken to him all day. He's been telling the chaps at school that I was in a blue funk last night, and ran away from nothing."

" I expect he was only joking."

" If it's his idea of a joke, it's not mine. Never thought Martin would be such an ass, and it's jolly mean."

" When are you going to make it up ? "

" Not until he takes back all he said."

It was not the first time there had been a passage-of-arms between the two boys, and Joan knew that it was best not to interfere in these quarrels, which were soon over and forgotten. She thought it wise to change the subject.

" I wish you'd show me how to do that puzzle of the pond and the five trees," she said.

Hugh drew towards him a sheet of scribbling paper, then felt in each of his waistcoat pockets. He thought for a moment, then rose from his chair.

" Bother it ! " he exclaimed. " I've left my silver pencil on the bench in the workshop. Don't want to lose it—hand me that electric torch and I'll get it now before I forget."

He did not need a light to guide him as he ran down

the garden. He unlocked the door of the workshop, then switched on his torch. As he stepped inside, something caught his eye which at first glance he fancied must be scraps of white paper which had been torn up and scattered on the floor. Seen closer, these proved to be bits of china. A quarter-plate developing dish had fallen from the shelf above, and been smashed to pieces.

"That's Joan's doing; she must have knocked it down when she took that cat away."

It seemed likely enough, yet Hugh felt puzzled. He had been standing close outside the open door of the shed at the time Joan took the cat from the shelf, and, had a dish fallen, he would have heard the smash. Besides, the girl would have known what she had done, and would have said something. Possibly she had unconsciously pushed the dish nearly off the shelf, and a few minutes later it had fallen of its own accord.

"She went fumbling about in the dark after she'd blown the lamp out, and didn't see what she was doing," thought Hugh.

He moved on, and with a grunt of satisfaction picked up his silver pencil-case, which was lying on the carpenter's bench. As he turned to retrace his steps, his eye followed the circling beam of his torch, and suddenly he made a fresh discovery. The window was open—the lower sash had been raised about three inches from the bottom of the frame.

"That's queer," he muttered.

He remembered quite distinctly looking at this same window when Joan made the remark about "Pepper's Ghost," and he felt sure that he would have seen if it had not been closed. It must have been opened after they had gone into the house for tea. There had been a day in the summer when the key of the workshop had

been mislaid, and Hugh had gained admittance through the window by forcing back the catch with the blade of his knife. The same thing must have been done within the last few hours. Some one had entered the shed, and, when leaving, had lowered the window-sash from the outside, but not right down to meet the frame. It seemed one of those careless acts which a person performs when in a hurry.

“ Some beastly thief must have been prowling round,” growled Hugh. “ He must have got in while we were at tea, and that’s how the dish was broken.”

With the aid of his torch he made a hasty search, but so far as he could see all of his and Joan’s belongings were in their usual places. His tools were all in the rack—not one of them was missing.

“ Can’t have been a thief,” the boy pondered. “ No, he’d have seen my silver pencil—that would have been the first thing he’d have bagged.”

There seemed no reason for any one to break into the workshop unless it was to steal something, and it was clear now that no such crime had been committed. Hugh was inclined now to think that the window must have been left in the same position all day, and that he had failed to notice it was open ; then he remembered Joan’s fancy that she had seen some one looking at them from outside.

“ I wonder if there was some chap loafing around, and thought he’d like to see what we were doing ? Soon as he twigged that Joan had spotted him he must have bobbed down, and slunk off into the bushes.”

Hugh stepped in front of the window, and raising his torch held it pointing towards him on a level with his chin. Instantly he beheld the ghostly reflection of his own face in the dark pane.

“Joan was right. She was standing in the glare from the lamp, and that’s how it happened.”

Hugh felt glad that he had not rushed off with the news that the workshop had been broken into by a thief. Last night he had been accused of raising a false alarm, and it would never do for Martin to hear that he had done the same thing again. He shut the window, locked the door, and returning to the breakfast-room merely told his sister that one of the developing dishes had been broken.

“Well, it isn’t my fault,” she protested.

“You couldn’t see what you were doing in the dark, and you must have pushed it nearly off the shelf when you moved the cat. Then, later on, it must have slipped and dropped.”

“I’m certain I never touched it. I believe you yourself have just broken that dish, and you want to make me pay for a new one.”

“No, I don’t,” laughed Hugh. “We’ll blame the cat; that’s what servants sometimes do when they break something.”

“Oh, it can’t have been the black cat’s fault,” said Joan. “It’s going to bring good luck, and I’m sure it wouldn’t make us smash our dishes. Now show me how you do that puzzle.”

CHAPTER VII

GOOD NEWS

WHILE dressing next morning Hugh's thoughts returned to the mystery of the broken dish, and as soon as he had finished breakfast he slipped out of the house and ran to the workshop. He was anxious to see if it had been raided during the night, but the windows were shut and fastened on the inside. He unlocked the door, and peered round the interior of the shed.

"All correct," muttered Hugh.

Seeing the fragments of broken china still lying scattered about on the floor, he picked them up, and threw them into a rubbish box beneath the carpenter's bench.

"I'd like to know if there are any rats under this floor," he mused. "A rat might have pushed that dish off the shelf."

He wasted another five minutes searching for a hole in the floor-boards, but there was no crevice large enough for a mouse to creep through, let alone a full-grown rat. At last he snatched up the bundle of school-books he had tossed down on a small table, and made for the door.

"Shan't tell Joan I've been here," he decided. "She'd think my nerves were on edge after seeing 'Pepper's Ghost.'"

The delay in starting for school caused by this visit to the workshop had an unfortunate result. As Hugh plunged out of the drive gate into Falcon Road he nearly

came into collision with Martin, who was striding past with no intention of waiting for his cousin. Neither of the boys was prepared for this unexpected meeting, which rather took their breath away.

"Hullo!" said Martin shortly.

"Hullo!" grunted Hugh.

They fell into step, and walked on in silence. Martin had wasted an hour the previous evening trying to repair the broken aeroplane; he felt that the person who had done the damage might at least say that he was sorry. Hugh, for his part, had forgotten all about the model and was still nursing his imaginary grievance. He waited for his companion to speak first, then himself opened fire.

"Well, it didn't come off," he sneered.

"What didn't?"

"Oh, you know; you tried to start the fellows ragging me for being a fool."

"When?"

"Yesterday morning; you, and Pollard, and Reeves were all laughing at me behind my back."

Martin was mystified, then he jumped to the conclusion that this tirade had reference to the mishap with the coke-scuttle.

"If you will play the fool you must expect fellows to laugh at you."

"I didn't play the fool. You'd have done the same thing yourself if you'd been in my place."

"Get away, I shouldn't have been such an idiot," returned Martin. "You dash at a thing without thinking what you're doing. There was no need——"

"Oh, shut up!" interrupted Hugh angrily. "I don't want to hear anything more, if that's all you've got to say."

He stepped off the pavement into the road, and deliberately slackened his pace. Martin walked on, and gradually the distance between the pair widened. Hugh jogged along, content to arrive at the King's School with the rearguard of day-boys. Among them was Ludmoor, who greeted him with a grin.

"Hullo, old stoker," chuckled Ludmoor as they passed through the entrance gateway. "Look here, if there's ever another strike on the railways, you and I might volunteer for a job on one of the engines."

"If we chucked the fuel about as we did yesterday, most of it would go on the line instead of into the fire-box," laughed Hugh. "Then there'd be another complaint made to Alwing that some of the King's School boys had been trying to wreck a train. I say, I wonder if it was one of our fellows?"

"Who?"

"The fellow who put fog-signals on the line."

"You may bet your life it wasn't."

"So I think, but I rather wondered if Alwing would drop on all the day-boys if no one confessed; keep us in for extra school."

"Not he! the Head's forgotten all about it by this time. He's got too much sense to suppose that any fellow would be such a silly ass. What sport can there be in stopping a train?"

"None at all that I can see."

"Of course there isn't. I'm as fond of a joke as any one, but I should never dream of playing the fool on the railway. By the way, there's something I wish you'd do. You're just the chap I want."

"What for?"

They had crossed the quad, and were nearing the entrance to the Big School. Sounds from within told

that boys were taking their places for the roll-call assembly.

"Oh, I won't tell you now," said Ludmoor. "It'll take too long to explain. I'll talk to you about it some other time."

It was a mistake to suppose that the railway scandal had blown over, and become entirely a thing of the past. When the bell rang for break, and the Upper Sixth began to file out of their classroom, Mr. Alwing called one of them back: "Winter, just a moment; I want to speak to you."

The skipper turned in obedience to the summons, and stepped back to the Head's desk, vaguely wondering if he was to hear some comment on his work.

"You held an inquiry after I received that complaint from the stationmaster, and you told me that none of the day-boys admitted having been concerned in putting detonators on the line."

"That's so, sir."

"And you've heard nothing about it since?"

"I haven't asked any more questions, sir."

"You didn't think it necessary?"

"No, sir."

"Still, if three boys had planned that outrage and carried it into effect, it's likely that one of them would have let the cat out of the bag. Fools are apt to boast of their folly, and so a secret comes to be common knowledge. I thought you might know if any rumour of that kind was going about in the school."

"I haven't heard a word, sir. My own opinion is that old Priest has a spite against us, and that's why he has been trying to make out that the fellows he saw that night belonged to the King's School."

"But why should he be nursing a grudge?"

"When he was out-porter, sir, he used to make a good bit at the beginning and end of each term handling our luggage. Now he doesn't like to see the money going to another man."

"No, I think that's a mistake," replied Mr. Alwing, smiling. "I saw Priest yesterday, and had a friendly talk with him. He's quite convinced that the boy he passed in the Chelfield Road was wearing our cap. He saw it plainly in the light from the gas-lamp."

The look on Winter's face showed that he thought this piece of evidence worthless.

"I asked if he would be able to recognize the boy supposing they met in the street, but of that he seemed doubtful. The boy's back was towards him as he passed, and Priest merely got a side view of his face." Mr. Alwing paused for a moment, then, in a confidential tone, he added: "My impression is that Priest has a strong suspicion in his mind as to who the boy really was."

"If he knows, he ought to have told you, sir," said Winter bluntly. "It's not fair to all the other day-boys."

"I can imagine that the old man is not dead certain, and doesn't want to risk getting himself into trouble. It's a serious charge to bring against any person; and if Priest made it, and it could be proved that he was mistaken, he'd have the boy's parents down on him in less than no time."

"Serve him jolly well right," thought Winter.

"I put another question to him," continued the Head. "Could he tell me how the boy was dressed? Priest said that the only distinctive thing he noticed, besides the school cap, was that the boy was wearing white mittens—woollen cuffs like you often see elderly people

wearing in cold weather to keep their wrists warm. White seems a strange colour, as they are usually black or navy blue ; white wool would so soon get dirty. Have you ever seen one of our boys with white mittens ? ”

“ I think I’ve seen a fellow wearing white woollen gloves, sir.”

“ Ah, but I’m not speaking of gloves. Priest is sure it was mittens. He saw the boy’s right hand, and the upper part, from the knuckles to the finger-tips, was bare.”

There was a pause, Winter standing with his lips firmly shut.

“ You still think it’s all a cock-and-bull story,” said Mr. Alwing with a laugh. “ I wish I did,” he continued, his face growing serious again. “ But I’m bound to say that I think Priest is quite honest, and that what he told me is the truth. It has made me feel anxious. Boys of a certain type sometimes do things which, to the average level-headed person, seem utterly amazing. In my younger days, when I was an under-master at Rundle, some boys formed what you might call a secret club. In order to belong to this institution each new member had to perform some act of daring set him by the rest. At last one unfortunate candidate failed in his task, and got himself into trouble, the result being that the whole gang were brought to justice. The fact that there were three boys concerned in that affair with the fog-signals makes me wonder if they were playing the same sort of game as the one to which I’ve just referred. A thing of that kind may go on underground for a time, then something happens which may bring disgrace on the whole school. D’you see what I mean ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ I don’t suppose any good would be gained by your

holding another inquiry, but I want you and other senior day-boys to keep your eyes open. You know a good deal more of what goes on out of school than I do, and if you see any boy inclined to cause disorder, and to lead other fellows into mischief, you must round him up. If he won't be guided by your advice, then you must report him to me."

"Very good, sir."

"I know I can rely on you, Winter," said Mr. Alwing kindly. "I'm sure that no one has the best interests of the school more at heart than you."

"Thank you, sir."

The skipper turned to leave the study, but as he reached the door Mr. Alwing spoke again.

"Are the day-boys going to win the football cup?" he asked.

"I hope so, sir," answered Winter, his face relaxing into a grin. "I think it lies between us and the School-house."

"Well, as good sportsmen, we should wish that the best side may win, and I shall be pleased for your sake if on that particular occasion the best side proves to be day-boys."

"Very kind of you, sir," murmured Winter, and passed out of the room with a smile on his face. He was leaving at Christmas, and for two seasons he had been doing his utmost to bring the Day-boys Fifteen into the running for the inter-house footer trophy. It was natural that he should wish for his men to carry it off the last time he would ever lead them into battle.

"Yes, I should like to see them win that cup," he pondered as he stepped out into the quad. "Alwing's a real good sort, but that complaint from the station-master seems to have got on his nerves, else he'd never

be ready to swallow that silly yarn of Priest's. White mittens—what rot ! I don't suppose there's any boy in the town has ever worn such a thing."

Not for a moment did Winter believe there was any truth in the out-porter's story, but it made him feel there was a need for every day-boy to watch his step. Any fresh complaint of disorder would revive the railway trouble, and there would be little satisfaction in winning the footer cup if the whole of the day-boy community ended the term in disgrace.

" I do hope they'll see the red light, and no one play the giddy ass between now and Christmas," muttered Winter ; then raising his voice, " Hi, Denston, I want to speak to you," he called.

Hugh turned on hearing the hail, and came trotting across the gravel. He was always pleased to be spoken to by the skipper, even if it merely meant being sent on some errand.

" Be sure you turn up for footer practice this afternoon," began Winter. " It'll be scratch teams as there's no match, and I want to play you in the First Game. You'll be there, eh ? "

" Right-o," replied Hugh, wondering why he should be honoured by a command to play on the Senior Ground.

" You seem to be coming on well in the Second Fifteen, and I may want you to play for the Day-boys team. Sherwell has crocked his knee, and I doubt if he'll be able to play again this term."

Hugh's face beamed with satisfaction. This meant that in all probability he would take part in the struggle for the cock-house cup. The first round had already been played, when Day-boys had beaten Hornby's ; next Wednesday the Schoolhouse were to encounter

Pratt's, and the winners of this match would meet Day-boys in the final round.

"I'll do my best, if—if I'm given the chance," said Hugh eagerly.

"We shall want every man to play for all he's worth when it comes to the final," said Winter in a friendly growl. "Mind, I don't say for certain that I shall put you in the team; see what you're like this afternoon. But I think you're the man."

"Who d'you think will carry off the cup?"

Winter smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Goodness knows," he chuckled. "I think Pratt's will be knocked out next week, so it'll be between us and the Schoolhouse. They're a hefty crowd, and I should say it'll be a pretty even game. Shan't know who's won till it's finished—that's my opinion. It'll be a good old battle for the last—my last, I mean."

Hugh nodded. The interview seemed to have come to an end, and he was moving away when the skipper called him back. "By the way, have you ever noticed one of the day-boys wearing white mittens?"

"Don't know what you mean," replied Hugh with a grin. "Are you trying to pull my leg?"

"No, my good chap, I'm not trying to be funny. I mean cuffs, to keep your wrists warm, made of white wool. Ever noticed any one wearing them?"

"No—never, so far as I can remember. Why d'you want to know?"

"I've been told that one of the King's School boys who stopped that train was wearing white mittens. Can't say I believe it; still, that's what's been said. Don't be late this afternoon. So-long."

Hugh wandered off feeling highly elated. Since his first term at the King's School it had always been his

ambition to play for the Day-boys in the inter-house matches, either cricket or football, but he had never expected the chance would come so soon.

"My hat!" he gurgled. "That'll be something to tell 'em when I get home. The old skipper won't say for certain, but I'll take care he doesn't turn me down."

He felt eager to share the glad news with some one. It would be a surprise for Joan, and his father would be pleased; but it seemed a long time to wait till dinner-time.

"I'll tell Martin," he thought. "Perhaps I'd better not tell any of the other chaps till I know it's a cert."

Hugh cast his eyes round the quad, searching for his cousin. He was in such a happy frame of mind that, for the moment, he had forgotten all about the quarrel; then suddenly he remembered. In his heart of hearts he knew that only a word was needed to bring about a peace-making, yet he hesitated, fearing that he might meet with a rebuff which would be galling to his pride.

"May seem as if I'm climbing down," he mused. "It was his fault calling me a funk, though I suppose he's ratty because I smashed his aeroplane. Still, there's no reason why we shouldn't cry quits, and have done with it. I expect he's in the reading-room."

Whistling the opening bars of a quick march, Hugh turned his steps in the direction of a door on the opposite side of the quad. He took a dozen strides, then he paused.

"Shall I tell him or shall I wait, and let him find it out for himself?"

Had he carried out his resolve without all this hesitation, then the thing would have been done, and this stupid estrangement brought to an end; but Hugh



"Hullo, Denston—just the man I've been looking for."

hung in the wind, and when he did at last decide to tell Martin the chance was gone. As he reached the door leading to the reading-room Ludmoor came charging out into the quad, and seized him by the arm.

"Hullo, Denston—just the man I've been looking for."

"Why, what d'you want?"

"Before school I said I'd got something to tell you, but there wasn't time. I'll tell you now."

The speaker linked arms with Hugh, and the pair joined the procession of boys strolling round the quad.

"What d'you think is the latest thing I've let myself in for?" laughed Ludmoor. "I've promised I'll audit some accounts."

"You!" scoffed Hugh. "You don't understand book-keeping."

"I know; all the same I've undertaken to audit the accounts of the Excelsior Football Club."

"Get away; I never heard of such a club."

"Don't suppose you have, so I'd better begin at the beginning. There's a lad named Cole who does some job in the fitting shop at our works, and towards the end of the summer he told me that he and a lot of other young braves meant to start a football club. Each member was to pay a bob, and I think they meant to cadge round among their friends, and get a bit more that way. Cole is quite a decent chap—always ready to clean my bicycle or do anything of that kind—so to encourage him, and help the good work, I said I'd join the club as an honorary member, and planked down the shilling. I forgot all about it till a few days ago; then I happened to see Cole as he was leaving work, and I asked him how the club was getting on. He told me it had gone to smash."

"Why?"

"You know Crabtree Lane? There's a little pub at the corner called the *Antelope*, and a bit farther down the lane there's a field which is or was the Excelsior Club's ground. It belongs to Jason, who is the landlord of the *Antelope*, and he let these fellows have the field for a small rent. It was just a nominal sum—I don't think it

was more than ten bob—but it was to be paid at the beginning of the season. Weeks went by, then, as Jason couldn't get a penny of his rent out of those fellows, he lost patience, and turned them off the field."

"Why didn't they pay up?"

"Oh, those silly fools agreed that a fellow named Bramble should be treasurer, and let him take charge of the cash. I've heard about this young Bramble—had a narrow shave of being hauled up in the police court not long ago. Well, when this row about the field came to a head, Cole and some other members of the club urged Bramble to pay the rent, and he calmly told them he couldn't settle up with Jason because all the money was spent. He tried to make out that it had gone in paying for the ball, goal-posts, and so forth, but that was all bosh. I'll bet you Master Bramble spent a good part of it on himself. So the Excelsior Football Club, of which H. T. Ludmoor, Esq., was an honorary member, has bust up."

Being himself a good sportsman, Hugh did not like the idea of other boys being cheated out of their game. It seemed to him cruel and unjust.

"What a beastly swindle," he growled.

"Oh, it's their own fault for letting Bramble handle the cash," said Ludmoor carelessly. "However, they ought to have a try to get some of it back, or at any rate to find out where it's gone, and that's where I come in."

"You?"

"Yes, I told Cole he ought to call a meeting of the club, and make the treasurer toe the line. So that's what he's done; the meeting is to be held this afternoon, and I've promised, as what you might call a disinterested sort of person, to attend, and audit the accounts. And look here, old sport, I want you to come too, just to check my

additions, if I have to make any. You're such a whale at figures. It won't take long—so you'll come, eh ? ”

For a moment Hugh pictured himself and Ludmoor seated in solemn state at the head of a long table with the members of the Excelsior Football Club ranged on either side. Pens, ink, blotting-paper, and a row of ponderous ledgers would be placed before him, and what he was supposed to do with them he had no idea.

“ I'm no good,” he declared ; “ I don't understand how to draw out a balance sheet.”

“ Balance sheet be hanged ! ” returned Ludmoor. “ I'll bet you all Bramble will have to show will be a penny memorandum book ruled for cash, with what he's received on one side and what he's spent on the other. All we shall have to do will be to add up the two columns, and see if the totals are correct. Then he'll have to explain what has become of the balance.”

“ Well, can't you do that yourself ? ”

“ I could, but I'd much rather you came with me, just in case I get muddled with the figures. Cole and the other chaps would think it jolly decent of you if you were to rally round, and show some interest in the club.”

Hugh pondered for a moment, then suddenly remembered the skipper's orders.

“ I can't come this afternoon. I've just promised Winter I'll turn up for footer practice. He'd be furious if I didn't.”

“ Oh, that doesn't matter ; the meeting isn't till four o'clock, and they are sure to be late. I'm coming to footer, so we can scoot off together down to Crabtree Lane after the play on our own ground's finished.”

“ Are they going to have this meeting in the pub ? ”

“ No fear ; there's an old stable in their field in which

Jason used to let them hang their coats. You might call it their Club Headquarters, and that's where we shall find them."

The prospect of being chosen to play in the Day-boy Fifteen had left Hugh in a particularly happy frame of mind. He was feeling ready to do any one a good turn, and there seemed no reason why he should not show a friendly spirit to the Excelsior Football Club by helping them to straighten out their accounts.

"I'll come if you think I shall be of any use," he said. "But I can't stay long."

"Good man," replied Ludmoor. "Bless you, it won't take more than ten minutes or a quarter of an hour at the most. There'll be some fun when——"

The end of the sentence was lost in the clamour of the bell calling for a return to work, and so the conference came to an end. The last lesson seemed a long one to Hugh, and when the school was dismissed, he hurried off home, eager to tell his good news to some one who would keep it a secret till he knew for certain that he would be given Sherwell's place in the team. Joan was a person he could trust; and, as dinner was not ready, he called her into the breakfast-room, and gave her a brief account of his interview with Winter.

"I am glad," she cried; "I said the black cat would bring us good luck."

"Get away," snorted Hugh, rather nettled at the absurd idea that his coming promotion was in any way due to the influence of a wooden image. "He must think I'm good enough, or he wouldn't put me in the team."

"Oh, I only said that in fun," laughed Joan. "Have you told Martin?"

"No, I don't mean to tell any one but you till I hear

it's definitely fixed. I expect Winter will let me know on Monday."

Joan thought for a few moments before she spoke again.

"I wish you'd make up this quarrel with Martin. You've always been such good friends."

"I did speak to him this morning, but he only called me a fool."

"Why?"

"Because he's still got the idea in his head that I'm the sort of chap who's frightened of his own shadow."

"I don't suppose he really thinks you're a coward. Anyway, Winter can't think you've lost your nerve, or he wouldn't choose you to play for the Day-boys."

"No, I suppose he wouldn't," replied Hugh, slightly mollified. "As for Martin, I think he owes me an apology; but I'll speak to him on Monday. It'll be an excuse to tell him I'm in the team, if Winter doesn't change his mind in the meantime."

"Well, don't change yours," urged Joan. "For goodness' sake be sensible and bury the hatchet. I'm tired of this wretched squabble."

CHAPTER VIII

A LIVELY MEETING

HUGH started for the King's School playing-field in a buoyant frame of mind. He was eager for the game, and meant to show the skipper what he was worth. Later on it would be a kindly and sportsmanlike act to come to the rescue of these factory lads who wished to play football, but had somehow run their club on the rocks.

"It won't take long," he said to himself as he swung off down Falcon Road. "All we can do is go through the accounts, and find out if they've got money enough to pay the rent."

The two scratch teams which met for practice on the Senior Ground were composed almost entirely of fellows in the Sixth Form and Upper Fifth. Hugh soon found that he was up against bigger men than he was accustomed to encounter in the Second Game, in which he could more than hold his own. But he packed quickly in the scrums, and once managed to stop Fairburn, a dangerous enemy three-quarter.

"Played, Denston!" called Winter. It had been a good tackle, holding both the man and the ball, of which the skipper had evidently taken note.

When the game ended, Hugh felt that, though he had not done anything very brilliant, his performance was as good as could have been expected, and that he was pretty sure of his place in the Day-boys team. He ran off to

get his overcoat, and a few moments later, as he jogged down the pavilion steps, he met Ludmoor, who had been playing on the Junior Ground. The absence of any honourable mud stains on his shorts and stockings betrayed the fact that his exertions had not been of a strenuous kind.

"Come on," said Ludmoor; "it's a good half-mile to Crabtree Lane, so we shall have to step out if we mean to get there in time."

The early November twilight was already beginning to fall as they left the playing-field. Turning down a by-road, they escaped from the crowd of boys homeward bound without having to answer any questions as to where they were going.

"Stupid of me," muttered Hugh. "I meant to have brought a pencil with me, but I forgot. Have you got one?"

"No, we shall have to borrow one if it's wanted," laughed Ludmoor. "I very much doubt if there will be any figures for us to check."

"Then what's the good of going? If there's nothing for us to do, we might as well chuck it, and scoot off home."

"No, come on," urged Ludmoor. "It's just possible this chap Bramble will bring a book, and, if so, I want you to help me look it through. If he's got any accounts to show, you may depend he'll have cooked 'em; and it'll be up to us to see how it's been done. Anyway, there's bound to be some fun, and it'll be worth seeing."

A suspicion began to dawn on Hugh's mind that his companion cared not a straw for the fate of the Excelsior Football Club, but was going to the meeting in the hope of seeing it end in a free fight. He himself had no wish to be mixed up in a row, even though it were

merely as an onlooker ; he was more than half inclined to turn back, and would have done so but for the fear that Ludmoor might think that he was suffering from another attack of " cold feet."

Ten minutes' quick walking brought them to the outskirts of the town. They reached the *Antelope Inn*, and turning down Crabtree Lane came to the field in which a pair of goal-posts could just be discerned in the deepening dusk. Their shape showed that soccer was the game played by the Excelsior Club, though the ground was apparently deserted.

" There's no one here," said Hugh with a sigh of relief, as he peered over the gate. " They must have had their meeting, and gone home."

" No fear," chuckled Ludmoor. " I'll bet you they are waiting for us over there in the club-house."

He pointed to an old stable, visible as a dark mass in a distant corner of the field. The two boys climbed over the gate and strode across the turf. On nearing the " club-house " a murmur of voices from within showed that Ludmoor's surmise was correct. " Told you so," he whispered ; then hammered on the door with his fist.

" Any one at home ? " he called.

There was a silence, then the door was opened cautiously, and a face appeared.

" Is that you, Mr. Ludmoor ? "

" Right you are, Cole ; and I've brought a friend of mine with me who's going to help check the accounts."

The two new-comers stepped into the stable, and the door was closed. The place was in pitch darkness, as the one window had been boarded up on the outside. A whispering and shuffle of feet told Hugh that there were a number of boys in the shed, and he wondered if they had been there all the afternoon.

"I say, it's precious stuffy in here," complained Ludmoor. "Why don't you let the door stand open?"

"We thought we'd better keep it shut in case Mr. Jason should come down the lane," answered Cole. "If he saw the door open he might guess some of us was here, and he's told us we are to keep out of the field."

"Well, is the treasurer here? He's the man we want to see."

"Bramble, you mean, sir. He hasn't come yet, but I told him the time, and one of the chaps started off five minutes ago to hurry him up."

"That's right, and I suppose he's been warned to bring his accounts. But look here, we can't examine them in the dark. What about a light?"

"Better put a match to that candle, Jim," said Cole to another member of the club. "It won't be seen from the lane if we keep the door shut."

A match was struck, and a light put to a candle stuck in a bottle which stood on a packing-case—the sole article of furniture which the "club-house" contained. It could be seen now that about a dozen members had chosen to attend the meeting. Hugh judged them to be mostly lads who were employed in the factories, and for whom Saturday was the one half-holiday of the week. Coming on them, as he did, after a real good game on the King's School ground, he was sorry to think that these fellows had been loafing round with nothing to do. He turned to the nearest person in the crowd.

"I hear you've not been able to play to-day; hard luck."

"It's Bramble's fault, sir," was the reply. "The man as owns the field might have let us have time to pay the rent if he'd been asked the proper way, but Bramble give him too much lip."

The candle flame flickering in a draught of air cast weird moving shadows on the walls of the stable, and to Hugh it seemed more like some gathering of Gunpowder Plot conspirators than a meeting called for auditing accounts. A murmur of conversation was going on around him, and he caught fragments of a remark spoken by Ludmoor to Cole.

"——shouldn't stand any nonsense. You chaps ought to go for him, and make him——"

"Here he comes," said a voice.

There was a sound of whistling, then the door was pushed open, and Bramble strode into the "club-house." He was a thick-set lad, with a cloth cap cocked in a jaunty manner on one side of his bullet head. The last inch of a cigarette he had been smoking hung down pasted to his lower lip.

"Is this the blinking Infants Class?" was his greeting.

"Thought you were never coming," grumbled Cole. "Shut the door, or any one passing down the lane'll see the light."

Bramble closed the door with a backward thrust of his foot. He advanced a couple of paces, then suddenly stopped dead, staring at Hugh with a look of astonishment as if the King's School boy had been some Indian Chief in full war-paint.

"Wot's this chap doing 'ere?" he demanded gruffly.

"He's a friend of mine, and I'm a member of the club," said Ludmoor.

"You play rugger at the King's School. So you don't want to join our club," returned Bramble.

"He's paid his subscription," said Cole. "Now we'll get on with the meeting, and what I propose is that Mr. Ludmoor act as chairman."

There was a general murmur of assent, to which Bramble paid no heed. His eyes still remained fixed on Hugh, as if something in the latter's appearance fascinated him. Ludmoor seemed highly amused, and quite ready to accept the part he had been asked to play.

"All right," he began. "As there isn't a chair, I'll remain standing. Silence, please, gentlemen. We don't want to waste any more time, so we'd better get to business. The first question, I understand, is about the rent of this field, and I call upon our friend the treasurer to explain why it hasn't been paid."

"I like that," exploded Bramble. "How the dickens is any one to pay the rent when the money's all gone?"

"Where to?" asked a voice.

"Where to?" cried the treasurer angrily. "It's been nothing but handing out money for one thing and another ever since this club was started. First there was the ball—that cost fifteen bob; then there was the goal-posts——"

"Have you brought the vouchers?" interrupted Ludmoor. "We'd like to see them, and the book in which you've been keeping your accounts."

"Do you think I'm paid for the job, and can give all me time to keeping accounts?" shouted Bramble. "As for them vouchers, I've got 'em at home, and, if my word ain't good enough, you'd better call me a thief at once. Let any one do that, and I'll push his face in."

There was a chorus of jeers which so incensed the treasurer that he swore roundly, and clenched his fists.

"Now then, who says I'm a thief?" he blustered.

"We haven't called nobody a thief," said Cole, "but we've got a right to know what's become of our money."

"You ain't got a right to make out I've been robbing, an' that's what you're trying to do," snarled Bramble.

"I won't stand that from any one—no, not from you, Mr. Solomon ; though you may reckon yourself a toff."

The last remark was addressed to the chairman. Hugh wished he was a mile away from Crabtree Lane. It seemed to him as if the meeting was bound to end in a fight, and this view was evidently shared by a small boy named Kite, who crept stealthily towards the door, and was gone before any one had time to call him back. Hugh tried to catch Ludmoor's eye, and make a signal for retreat, but the chairman was talking in a low voice to Cole, who was now standing by his side.

"Speak up, an' let's 'ear wot you're saying," cried Bramble truculently. "If it's anything about me——"

The speech was interrupted by the sudden reappearance of Kite, who dashed into the stable, closing the door behind him with a slam.

"You'd better clear out," he panted. "Jason's coming. I 'eard his voice speaking to some one in the lane."

The alarm was followed by dead silence ; then Cole sprang towards the candle, and blew out the light. In the darkness there was a movement among the crowd as if every one was preparing for a dash out into the field.

"Keep quiet," growled Bramble. "Jason don't know we're 'ere. Wot's the good of rushing out into the lane, and throwing yourselves into his arms."

The treasurer's advice seemed sound, and for a full minute the whole company remained quiet as mice. Then Hugh held his breath as he caught the thud of heavy footsteps. A moment later the stable door was flung open, and the dark figure of a man appeared silhouetted on the threshold. It was impossible to distinguish his features in the gloom, but there could be no doubt that this was the owner of the field.

" You young blackguards ! " he cried in raucous tones. " Now I've got you ! "

Certain things which had occurred during the afternoon had tried Jason's temper, and the news given him by a friend that some boys were larking in his stable with a lighted candle, and might set the place on fire, had fanned his rage into a flame.

" I told you lads to keep out of this field," he roared. " You come here planting your goal-posts and messing up my turf, and as soon as I ask when the rent's going to be paid, all I get is abuse. Very well, it's no use my speaking, but I'll get some one to talk to you who'll make you understand. Now then, come on out, one at a time, and I'll take your names."

The speaker stepped to one side of the doorway, allowing sufficient room for his prisoners to pass out in single file. There was no other exit from the stable since the boarded window offered no way of escape, yet no one seemed anxious to be the first to surrender. There was a shuffling of feet, then some one caught Hugh by the arm and whispered in his ear.

" Put your cap in your pocket," said Ludmoor quickly. " Call yourself Tomkins—any old name."

" Now then, don't keep me standing here all night," stormed Jason. " If you think—*ough* ! "

Some one had at last decided to move, and that person was the Excelsior Club's treasurer. Getting off the mark with astonishing speed, and with his head bent like that of a charging goat, he butted Jason in the stomach, and darted past him into the field. The landlord gasped and staggered ; then, blind to the fact that he was leaving the stable door unguarded, he went pounding away in chase of his assailant, bellowing with wrath.



"You'd better clear out. Jason's coming."

"There's two gates to this field," cried Cole. "Come on, make for the one down by the pond."

The next moment Hugh found himself wedged in a mass of struggling forms which blocked the doorway; but he got through, and a few seconds later was racing down Crabtree Lane with Ludmoor by his side. It was not until they were some distance past the *Antelope* that they ventured to slacken their speed.

"I told you there'd be some fun," panted Ludmoor.

"That chap Bramble seemed to have taken a fancy to you—kept staring at you as if you were an old friend."

"I know he did," growled Hugh. "I can't remember having seen him before, and I've no wish ever to see him again."

CHAPTER IX

CLASSROOM LAW

JOAN glanced up from the book she was reading.

"How did you get on?" she inquired.

She had been expecting to hear a full account of the practice game as soon as her brother entered the house, but he had gone off upstairs to change. Even now he did not seem at all eager to answer the question. He came to the fire beside which the girl was seated, and leant down to warm his hands.

"How did you get on?" repeated Joan.

"Oh, all right."

"Did you kick any goals?"

"Kick any goals!" scoffed Hugh impatiently. "No, of course I didn't. D'you think I was playing with a lot of kids?"

Joan thought it wise to ask no more questions; she fancied that her brother had been disappointed, that he must have been "off his game" that afternoon, and so failed to show himself fit for a place in the Day-boys team. She noticed that he hardly spoke a word at tea, and remained unusually silent during the rest of the evening.

Hugh's mind was busy with his recent adventure in Crabtree Lane. In one way the whole affair seemed comic. His own expectation of a formal and orderly

business meeting, at which he and Ludmoor would cast up columns of figures, and solemnly decide if the accounts presented by the treasurer were to be passed as correct, had been so different from the wild doings in Jason's stable.

"It was stupid of me to have gone," he told himself. "I might have known that Ludmoor didn't care a brass farthing about those accounts. He went simply to enjoy the fun of seeing those Excelsior men give Bramble a licking."

All said and done, there was nothing to worry about. It was not as if some crime had been committed. A number of lads had congregated in a shed of which its owner had forbidden them the use, and that was a mild offence, the sort of thing which boys of the Excelsior type were always doing.

"We got away all right, and that's the end of it," said Hugh to himself.

But while he was undressing that night a thought occurred to him which made him pause in the act of winding his watch. It might be too soon to decide that the Crabtree Lane adventure was finished and done with ; there might be trouble still brewing.

All through Sunday this unpleasant feeling of doubt and uncertainty lingered in his mind, and on Monday he hurried off to school eager to ask a question, the answer to which would show if there was really any need for further anxiety. Ludmoor was the person he wanted, and Ludmoor was discovered leaning against the trunk of one of the trees in the quad with an open book in his hand. It was evident that he had scamped his home-work on Saturday, and was endeavouring to make up for lost time.

"Hullo, have you made out the balance sheet ? " was

his greeting, given with a laugh. "I say, what do you think of me as 'Mr. Chairman'?"

"If I'd known what was going to happen, I'd never have let you drag me off on such a fool's errand," returned Hugh. "Look here, I want to talk to you. I'm not sure we've heard the last of that business. What became of Bramble?"

"You saw him charge out of the stable."

"Yes, but was he collared?"

"I shouldn't have cared if he'd been copped, and given a jolly good hiding."

"But was he caught, or did he escape? That's what I want to know."

"My dear chap, why are you in such a state of mind about our 'treasurer'?" chuckled Ludmoor. "If ever any one deserved a licking, I should say he did."

"You don't see what I'm driving at," began Hugh impatiently. "The way that chap butted Jason in the stomach may have seemed comic at the time, but it was a serious thing. Jason might get a summons against him for assault. If he——"

Hugh broke off short, as if he had forgotten what he meant to say. Out of the corner of his eye he had caught sight of his cousin, who came strolling past the pair under the tree. For a moment it seemed as if Martin meant to stop and speak to them. He checked his stride, then apparently changed his mind, and strode on across the gravel.

"Well, what were you going to say?" prompted Ludmoor.

"Why, if Bramble got collared, he's just the sort of beast who'd try to get off by laying the blame on other people. He might have given Jason the names of all the fellows who were in the stable. He heard your

name mentioned, and I believe he knows who I am, though that's a thing I can't understand. Well, if Jason means to make trouble, and has all the names——"

"Oh, I see what you mean now," broke in Ludmoor with another laugh. "My good chap, you needn't worry. Bramble got away all right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course I am. Shouldn't say so if I wasn't."

"But you didn't see how the chase ended."

"No, but I met Cole last night, and he told me about what happened after you and I had cleared off the scene. Jason must have chased Bramble all down the field, though he can't run for nuts, and had no chance of catching the beggar from the start. That, as you know, made it easy for all the other Excelsior men to sling their hook; but they weren't satisfied."

"Not satisfied—why?"

"With the way this blessed 'treasurer' of theirs had rendered his accounts. They got a couple of big chaps to help them, and later in the evening they collared Master Bramble, and threatened to wring his neck if he didn't hand over the balance of their cash. Well, the end of it all was Bramble admitted that he owed them about a pound, and he swore solemnly that, if they'd wait, he'd pay it back, as he was coming into a small fortune in a few days' time."

"What a lie!"

"Just what I said, but Cole seemed satisfied. Bramble wouldn't tell them where the money was coming from, only that it was a dead cert he'd have it before long. So they let him off on condition that he kept his promise."

"I wouldn't take that fellow's word—would you?"

"Not from the little I've seen of him," laughed Lud-

moor. "There's something a bit mysterious about that blighter and his way of doing things, and I shall be interested to hear if he ever repays that quid. Well, look here, old chap, I must have a look at this beastly rep., so I can't talk any more just now. See you again later."

By a stroke of good fortune which he did not deserve, Ludmoor was called upon to begin the rep., and so was able to respond with the opening verse, the only one he had had time to hammer into his mind. He resumed his seat with a sigh of relief, and his thoughts wandered off to Crabtree Lane. Even in his own mind he was inclined to exaggerate any act which he might afterwards claim to have been a deed of daring. Now, as he came to look back on the Excelsior squabble, it seemed to him a glorious rag in which he himself had played the leading part. He longed to give his own version of the story to a circle of admiring listeners, but there was something in what Hugh Denston had said about the assault on Jason being a serious offence, so perhaps it was best to keep the whole thing dark.

It was raining hard when the bell rang for break. Mr. Dolphin departed, followed by a number of boys heading for such places of shelter as the gym or reading-room, but half the Form lingered in the classroom, at a loss to know how to enjoy their brief spell of freedom.

"What weather!" growled Pollard, who, with his shoulders humped and his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, stood gazing out of a window. "If any sportsman will offer a purse of a hundred pounds I'll go out and swim across the quad."

No one seemed disposed to encourage what would certainly have been an historic performance. Nothing

daunted, Pollard turned away from the window, now with a fresh idea in his mind.

"Look here," he cried, "let's call on Reeves to give us his popular lecture on white mice. I'll take the chair."

The last three words roused in Ludmoor a sudden impulse too strong to resist.

"I took the chair at a meeting on Saturday night," he boasted, "and it ended in a free fight."

Hugh felt as if some one had jabbed a pin into him. He could have kicked the speaker. What an ass the fellow must be!

"Liar!" shouted Pollard.

"It's quite true."

"It's not. It's just the sort of gas you are always giving off, and you ought to be muzzled. I know what we'll do—have a trial. I'll be judge. Make that chap prisoner, and bring him before the court. The charge against him is that he's just told a blooming lie."

The idea caught the fancy of the assembly, and the leading rôle of judge having been secured by Pollard, there was a rush to claim minor parts. A sprightly youth named Searl proclaimed himself counsel for the prosecution, while Reeves asserted that he had been briefed to appear for the defence. Seven fellows crowded on to a front desk, and announced that they were the jury, while three stalwarts volunteered to act as warders, and took the prisoner in charge. Pollard mounted the low platform on which stood the master's desk, and seated himself in solemn state. Hugh felt strongly inclined to bolt out of the room, but he felt that had he done so he would not have been able to deny any wild statement which might be made about him by Ludmoor.

"Silence!" cried the judge.

"SILENCE!" bawled the whole assembly,
"S-I-L-E-N-C-E!"

"Will you stop that row?" demanded the judge, brandishing an ebony ruler. "Some of you will be sorry if I have to leave the bench and give you a hiding. You seem to forget that this is a Court of Justice. Gentlemen of the jury, this degraded wretch you see before you has been charged with telling an untruth, a falsehood, a blooming lie, and his punishment will be that the warders will hold him over a desk while each member of the jury gives him a whack with the fire shovel."

"My lord," protested Reeves, "my client hasn't been tried."

"Sorry, I forgot," replied the judge. "Get on with it. Mr. Searl, you are counsel for the prosecution, I believe. Well, kick off."

The order was followed by a sudden disturbance due to the fact that the prospect of being entitled to whack Ludmoor with the shovel had fired three of his classmates with a desire to join the jury. They made a determined attempt to lodge themselves on the end of the front bench, but were repulsed after a brief struggle.

"Stop that noise!" stormed Pollard. "If there's any more disorder in this court I'll sentence every one to death. Now, Searl."

"My lord, and gentlemen of the jury," began Searl, who had no notion of what he meant to say, "I should like to tell you the story of George Washington. You may remember that, when quite a boy, his father gave him an axe——"

"My lord," expostulated Reeves, "I strongly object to hearing the story of George Washington."

"So do I," agreed the judge. "I think it's a most rotten tale, and I don't believe it for a moment. Mr. Searl, will you cut George Washington out ; do it with the axe if you like, and for goodness' sake get on with the case."

"Unlike the gentleman I have just mentioned," continued Searl, "the prisoner at the bar can never tell the truth. He has had the audacity to say that he took the chair at a meeting."

"So I did," interrupted Ludmoor.

"Be careful, sir," cried the judge. "What sort of a meeting was it at which you took one of the chairs—stole it, I imagine?"

"It was the meeting of a lads' club formed by a fellow called Cole who works in our fitting shop. They wanted to settle some business connected with their accounts, and Cole asked me to take the chair."

Since every one knew that Ludmoor's father was a manufacturer, and it was not unlikely that a lads' club had been formed in connection with the works, it was impossible so far to declare that the prisoner's statement was incorrect. Yet for a joyous ending of the trial it was necessary that he should be proved guilty of having told an untruth.

"But you said that this meeting ended in a free fight."

"So it did," answered Ludmoor with a laugh. "But that wasn't my fault. It was the queerest thing I ever saw in my life."

"What thing was queer?" asked the judge, who was beginning to feel interested. "D'you mean how they fought?"

"No, I mean how the fight began."

"Then tell us how it did begin."

The glint of satisfaction which shone for a moment in Ludmoor's eyes might have told a close observer that he had been angling for something, and at last got a bite. Hitherto he had kept a grin on his face; now his look became serious.

"You may think I'm 'gassing,' as you call it," he began. "Even now I can't understand how it was done, unless the fellow had something hidden in his sleeve."

A hush had fallen on the court. The seven jurymen had all turned their faces in the same direction, while the judge leant forward over his desk, goggle-eyed. Hugh half opened his mouth, wondering what was coming next. He had been at the meeting in Jason's stable, yet for the life of him he could not remember that anything had been done which might have had some resemblance to a conjuring trick.

"What fellow?" inquired Pollard.

"This fellow Cole I've been telling you about. I'll just show you what he did. He came to the small table at which I was sitting—just an ordinary deal table, and with no cloth on it, mind. He came up, and planked down a two-bob bit."

Ludmoor stepped forward to the judge's desk, and made a movement of his hand to show the way in which the coin had been placed on the table.

"I asked Cole what the money was for, and he said he'd tell me in a minute. Now, mark you, I had my eyes on him all the time. He turned round—like this—then he began to walk slowly back to his seat as if he was counting the paces like a person does before taking a photograph. One—two—three—four—five——"

Ludmoor trod the five paces, then with a whoop he dashed down the aisle between the rows of desks, sprang out of the classroom, and closed the door behind him

with a bang. For a moment every one seemed to think this was all intended to represent the mysterious behaviour of Cole. The warders had relinquished their grip of the prisoner's arms in order that he might show what had been done with this mysterious florin, and now it suddenly struck them that they had allowed him to escape.

"He's hooked it!" cried Hampson. "That's what he was aiming at all the time."

"After him!" shouted the judge.

There was a roar of laughter. The whole court seemed ready to join in the chase; Searl and Reeves led the rush which poured through the door into the corridor. The stamp of their feet and the clamour of voices died away in the distance; then as silence fell on the classroom Hugh glanced round and saw that the only other fellow who had not joined in the hunt was Martin Grane. The latter had shown no interest in the mock trial, and was sharpening a lead pencil. He closed his knife, slipped it into his pocket, then rose and strolled towards his cousin.

"You left this key-chain at our place," he began, tossing the article named down upon the desk. "Mother only found it yesterday, and she told me to bring it to school. I should have given it you as soon as I got here, only you were talking to Ludmoor when I passed you in the quad."

"Thanks," murmured Hugh. "Thank Aunt Margaret—jolly good of her to have remembered it was mine."

There was a pause.

"I saw you and Ludmoor scoot off after footer practice on Saturday," began Martin. "Were you at this meeting he's been talking about?"

"Yes, I was there."

"I can't think why you are so thick with that chap. He's sure to get you into a bother."

"All he did on Saturday was to ask me to go with him to a meeting connected with a football club, which was started by a chap from Ludmoor's works."

"And did this meeting end in a free fight?"

"No, of course it didn't. Every one ran away."

"Yourself included?"

"Oh, I'm not going to stand that," said Hugh angrily.

"You're always trying to make out I'm a funk."

"I'm not——"

"Yes, you are. You'd like to make every one believe that I got scared, and ran away that night we went into the garden at Netherby; now you want to make out I did the same sort of thing on Saturday. I wish you'd leave me alone."

"What I meant——" began Martin.

"Oh, shut up!" cried Hugh, and springing to his feet he marched out of the room.

"It's no good trying to be friends with that chap," he told himself as he strode down the corridor. "He's got his knife into me for some reason or other, and must keep on trying to make out that I've lost my nerve, and am afraid of the dark. He'll get me branded with some nickname if the fellows believe half he says."

Hugh had swung out of the classroom with an angry scowl, but his face was bright and smiling when he reached home at dinner-time. He seemed to have forgotten all about the mock trial, and the fresh passage-of-arms with Martin. He had a piece of news for the family, and told it as he took his seat at table.

"I'm to play for the Day-boys in the final round for the footer cup," he said, trying to speak in a casual

tone. "Sherwell has crocked up, and I'm to take his place."

"Good," said Mr. Denston, who had himself played in King's School Day-boys teams of long ago. "Well done, Hugh."

"Ripping!" cried Joan. "Mother, you and I must both go to watch the match."

"I won't promise till I see what the weather's like," laughed Mrs. Denston. "I can't stand about on that field when it's blowing a bitter cold wind. But, if I can't go, your father will take you, I'm sure."

"When did you know?" asked the girl, turning to Hugh.

"Winter told me at the end of morning school."

"What did he say?"

"Say?—oh, nothing much. He just told me he was going to put me in the team, and that I was to keep fit and turn up at all practice games between now and the match."

"Then mind you do," cautioned Joan. "Don't you do anything silly—catch cold, or anything of that sort."

"No fear," replied Hugh with a laugh.

It flashed across his mind that he certainly had done something silly on Saturday night, something which would no doubt have vexed Winter had he witnessed the wild stampede from Jason's field. But that had been all Ludmoor's fault, and nothing of the kind would happen again.

"No fear," Hugh repeated. "You needn't think I'm going to miss the chance of getting my Day-boy colours."

CHAPTER X

SOME SCHEME

It was three o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, and Joan was walking down Falcon Road with a small basket in her hand. She quickened her pace as she recognized some one coming towards her from the direction of the town.

"At last!" she cried. "Look here, Martin, I've been wanting to speak to you for ages. How is it you aren't playing football?"

"I've been having a tooth stopped," was the reply. "Couldn't make an appointment with the dentist on a whole school-day, so I was obliged to give footer a miss."

"Have you heard that Hugh has got a place in the Day-boys team?"

Martin nodded.

"Did he tell you?" asked the girl.

"No, I forget who told me. It ought to please Uncle Frank—remind him of the days when he was in the School Fifteen."

"Hugh said he'd tell you himself when he knew for certain, but I suppose he didn't," began Joan after a moment's silence. "Why can't you two boys be friends again—why don't you make up this silly quarrel?"

"My dear Joan, I can't help it. Every time I say anything to Hugh he jumps down my throat."

"How long is it going to last?"

"You'd better ask Hugh."

"Well, I do think it's rot," said Joan decisively. "What are we going to do in the Christmas holidays if you boys won't speak to each other?"

"Let's hope that peace will be proclaimed before then," laughed Martin. "He'll be in a better frame of mind when the holidays begin. The last week of the term I'll send him a Christmas card with robins on it, and 'Ye same olde wish.' That ought to melt his heart—you see if it doesn't."

Joan frowned, and shook her head.

"I'm vexed with Hugh," she complained. "He said he should speak to you when he knew for certain if Winter meant to put him in the team. He's so pig-headed. I've a good mind to get mother to tackle him, and give him what she calls one of her 'straight talks to young men.'"

"No, don't do that; it would only make matters worse," replied Martin quickly. Then, as if anxious to change the subject, "What's that basket for?" he asked. "Are you going shopping?"

"No, I want to get some chestnuts to send to New Zealand."

"For some one's Christmas dinner? You'll be too late—ought to have sent them a week or two ago."

"You silly, it's not that kind of chestnut. I mean what the boys call 'conkers'; and they are to be planted—not eaten."

"I believe you are trying to pull my leg."

"It's quite true," laughed Joan. "I'll tell you the whole story. I daresay you've heard us speak of Mrs. Haywood. She was mother's great friend years ago, before she married and went to New Zealand. Mother

had a long letter from her this morning, and she asked if we could send her a few chestnuts."

"Has she been suddenly seized with a wish to play 'conkers'?"

"No, I suppose she feels a bit home-sick at times, and wants something to remind her of the old country. She used to live at a house called Shipston, down Chestnut Avenue, and says that one of the big trees was just outside their front gate. She'd like some nuts from this particular tree if we can get them. If one of them grew into a tree, she'd feel that it came from her old home."

"What a queer stunt," said Martin. "But she should have written you sooner—all the chestnuts are down and gone by now."

"I know; but mother said I'd better just go to the Avenue, and have a look. Then she'll be able to tell Mrs. Haywood we did what we could."

"Give me the basket, and I'll come too. I've nothing else to do, and I want a walk."

The basket changed hands, and the two cousins turned their steps in the direction of Chestnut Avenue. Martin described some New Zealand stamps he had lately put in his album; then a fresh thought seemed to strike him, and for a few moments he pondered over it in silence.

"It strikes me there's money in that idea," he said suddenly.

"What idea?"

"Why, we ought to go into partnership, and start an agency for sending chestnuts or acorns—yes, acorns would be better—for sending them to places in the Dominions or the United States. Lots of towns overseas have the same names as towns in the old country. There's Perth, and Launceston; there's a Worcester in Cape Colony, and a Worcester in the United States."

"What a clever little boy you are," gurgled Joan. "I didn't think you knew so much geography."

"It might be done," continued Martin. "We should have to put advertisements in their local papers with the picture of a gigantic old tree, and the wording under it might run: 'Would you like a British Oak like this for your garden, born in such-and-such a town, England? If so, send postal order to the Hearts of Oak Agency, and it will send you six best selected acorns, securely packed.'"

"Nonsense," interrupted Joan. "People living in Launceston, Tasmania, would want acorns from Launceston in Cornwall; and it would be the same with the other towns you mentioned. If you sent them acorns we'd picked up under some old tree down one of our lanes it'd be a swindle."

"I know; but we should have to have agents all about the place in this country. It would be easy to get boys to collect bags full of acorns for a few coppers. Then we'd turn your shed into a warehouse, and have a lot of bins labelled with the names of the places. I'll bet you we should make a pot of money."

"No, I'll tell you what I think would be better," began Joan in a serious tone, though with a twinkle in her eyes. "I should start a society for getting children in this country to send acorns to children living in a town of the same name as theirs across the sea. You can start acorns growing in little glass vases full of water—same as hyacinths."

"Some scheme, and jolly patriotic," declared Martin. "Sort of idea for knitting all parts of the Empire more closely together. Joan, you'll be no end of a swell as founder of the society. There'll be pictures of you in all the illustrated papers."

"Yes, you'll see a picture of me, with my face wreathed

in smiles, accepting a bag of acorns from some party of the—the—what ought we to call it ? ”

“ The ‘ Hearts of Oak,’ ” decided Martin. “ And we’ll have a uniform, something like the old Foresters used to wear at a fête—a tunic of Lincoln green, belt, gauntlets, and a hat with a big feather. You’d look fine dressed up as the ‘ Chief Heart.’ ”

“ Oh, I think that uniform sounds too expensive,” laughed Joan. “ I think if we had a badge—a little silver acorn—it would be enough.”

“ Well, if you want something cheap we’d better wear coats of blue paint, and call ourselves ‘ Ancient Britons ’ instead of ‘ Hearts of Oak.’ One pot of paint would supply the outfit for a whole troop.”

“ No, I like ‘ Hearts of Oak,’ but a badge is better than a uniform.”

“ Well, even if it’s plain clothes, I think I ought to wear a sword,” said Martin.

“ As ‘ Chief Heart,’ if I see you come on parade wearing a sword, I’ll send you home with a message to Aunt Margaret to tell her she’s to put you to bed,” threatened Joan.

They were still laughing over their new project when they reached Chestnut Avenue. A double row of big trees had given the road its name, and the first they came to showed that they were not likely to find what they sought. A few yellow leaves still remained clinging to the otherwise naked boughs, but not a single ‘ conker ’ could be seen.

“ I’m afraid it’s a wash-out,” said Martin. “ Mrs. Haywood should have written a bit sooner.”

“ We’d better go as far as the tree she spoke of,” sighed Joan. “ Then mother can tell her we did all we could.”

They walked on slowly, finding here and there a small drift of fallen leaves, but hunting in vain for the prickly burrs which would have been so plentiful a few weeks ago. At length they arrived at a front gate on which, in white letters, was inscribed the name Shipston. The house itself stood some distance back from the road ; in front of it were grass plots and flower-beds, while a belt of shrubs lined the inside of the boundary iron railing. A huge chestnut tree rose nearly opposite the gate, some of its big branches spreading out high over the footpath.

" This is the tree," murmured Joan. " But it's—like the rest."

Martin stepped out into the road, and was peering up into the great tree in the hope of seeing one last remaining " conker " which he might be able to bring down with a stone, when his cousin hailed him from the pavement.

" I've found one," she said. " And one's better than nothing."

She was peering through the iron railing ; Martin joined her, and following the direction of her gaze saw a solitary chestnut lying under one of the shrubs. It was very dark in colour, and had evidently lain in its present position for some time.

" It's just out of reach," mourned Joan, after several attempts had been made to secure the treasure by arms being thrust through the railing. " I wish we'd brought a stick with a crooked handle."

" I'll dodge in and get it for you," said Martin. " It won't take more than half a sec."

" No, some one will rush out and chase us all down the Avenue. But I don't see why I shouldn't ring the bell, and ask politely if I may have the nut."



"I've found one, and one's better than nothing."

Bracing herself to the task Joan pushed open the front gate, and the pair walked gingerly up the gravel path. A maid-servant answered their ring. It would have been difficult for any one thus meeting her for the first time to realize that she was a little hard of hearing.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," began Joan rather faintly. "I've come to ask if I may have the chestnut——"

"The what, miss?" interrupted the maid.

"The chestnut," repeated Joan, raising her voice, then unconsciously allowing it to sink again. "It's lying under one of the shrubs just inside your railing."

"Please wait a minute and I'll speak to Mrs. Craddock."

The maid retired across the hall, and entered a room in which the lady of the house sat writing a letter.

"Please'm, there's some one called about the chesterfield."

The article of furniture referred to stood in the drawing-room; it needed a fresh cover, and a firm of upholsterers who had been interviewed about it that morning had promised to send for it. Mrs. Craddock laid down her pen, and walked to the front door. She was expecting to behold two men in green baize aprons, and seeing only a boy and a girl standing in the porch she raised her eyebrows in mild astonishment.

"Is the wagon outside?" she asked, with a smile.

"Oh no, we don't want a wagon," gasped Joan.

"Then what are you going to take it away in?"

"I'll put it in my pocket."

"In your *pocket*?"

"Yes, if you'll allow me to take it."

Mrs. Craddock's kindly grey eyes twinkled with amusement, then she burst out laughing.

"My dear child," she exclaimed, "I don't think you know what you're talking about. Now come with me, and I'll show you what I mean."

She took Joan by the arm, and led her into the house, Martin following, determined to stick by his cousin. All three entered the drawing-room; they came to a halt, and Mrs. Craddock pointed at the chesterfield.

"There!" she said. "Now tell me how on earth you expect to get that into your pocket."

Martin felt for a moment as if he had gone up in an aeroplane and was looping the loop; he could not imagine what queer game this strange lady was playing. Joan was the first to guess what it all meant.

"Oh, I don't want a chesterfield," she cried breathlessly. "What I asked the maid if I might have was a *chestnut*."

It took Joan and Martin several minutes to make clear what was the real object of their visit, and, when this had been done, Mrs. Craddock explained the cause of her own mistake.

"You see," she concluded, "we haven't been living here very long, so I didn't know who you were. I thought you'd been having a ride on Luton's van, and had come in to tell me it had arrived. However, now we understand one another at last."

The two visitors laughed; little did they imagine to what strange consequences this wild-goose errand of theirs would lead.

"Then may I have the chestnut?" asked Joan.

"Of course you may, but I should think it must be rotten by now. Wait a moment—a bright thought has just struck me. I've got a lot of chestnuts which fell among our shrubs from that big tree. I put them in a paper bag meaning to give them to a small boy whom I saw searching for 'conkers' in the road; but I haven't seen him since, so you shall have them."

Mrs. Craddock left the room, and returned a few moments later with a paper bag in her hand.

"There you are," she said, smiling. "I'm sure I don't know if these things will grow after being kept so long in a dry place. I should think they ought to be well

soaked in water before they are put into the ground. Ah, here comes my husband ; perhaps he can tell us."

Mr. Craddock declared that, as he was not a forester or botanist, he would give no definite opinion ; but he seemed to think there was a sporting chance that some of the nuts would prove fertile. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with the bronzed face of a man who spent much of his time in the open air.

" But why do you particularly want those nuts from the tree outside our gate ? " he inquired.

Joan explained the reason why they had come to Chestnut Avenue, and Mrs. Craddock laughingly described the cause of her own surprise when she had seen the two young people standing in the porch.

" I think it would cost you a small fortune in stamps to send a chesterfield out to New Zealand by parcel post," he chuckled. " As for carrying this one of ours away in your pocket—no, I really don't see how that could be done."

He proved an easy person with whom to make friends, and the talk turned to New Zealand, where it appeared a brother of his had for many years been living.

" Mrs. Haywood sent mother a piece of greenstone last Christmas," said Joan. " I think it's supposed to bring good luck."

" Then I think I'd better borrow it," laughed Mr. Craddock. " It might prove an antidote to a stroke of bad luck I had the other day, though I suppose it was partly my own fault. It's a lesson——" The speaker paused, attracted by something which he must have seen through the window. " Curious—when I was just going to tell you," he murmured. " Excuse me a minute."

He was in the act of leaving the room when a ring

came to the front door. Joan turned to thank Mrs. Craddock for the bag of chestnuts.

"It is kind of you. I'm afraid we mustn't stay any longer. Please don't trouble to come with us; we can find our way out. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, my dear. I hope we shall meet again."

Mr. Craddock, who was found standing in the porch talking to a policeman, waved the two cousins a friendly farewell.

"Mother will be pleased when I show her these nuts," said Joan as she tripped down the path. "I wonder what Mr. Craddock was going to tell us about a piece of bad luck."

"Perhaps his house has been burgled," suggested Martin with a laugh. "That policeman has come to hunt for foot-prints or finger-marks. If so, I hope the thief will be caught."

"So do I," agreed Joan. "But the house didn't look as if it had been plundered. I shall ask Mr. Craddock to finish the story if ever I see him again."

CHAPTER XI

WAYLAID

"SORRY I'm late, mother," murmured Mr. Denston as he took his seat at the tea-table ; then, " Who won ? " he asked.

Hugh had spent his Saturday afternoon on the school playing-field watching the semi-final match for the footer cup.

" Schoolhouse, thirteen points to three," he answered. " Pratt's ought to have done better, but their passing was wild, and they seemed to go all to pieces in the second half."

" Then it will be Day-boys *v.* Schoolhouse for the final ? "

" Yes, father ; that's what we've been expecting from the start."

" And are the Day-boys going to win ? " asked Mrs. Denston.

" Hope so," answered Hugh, " but it'll be a tough job. The Schoolhouse fellows are hot stuff. We shall have to go ' all out ' if we mean to put them in the cart."

" Put them in Luton's furniture van," laughed Joan. " D'you know that mother and I met Mrs. Craddock this afternoon ? We told her we'd just sent the ' conkers ' to New Zealand."

" I said I meant to call and thank her for her kindness

in letting us have the bag of chestnuts," added Mrs. Denston with a smile. "She's asked me to come Tuesday afternoon."

"Mother," began Joan, "if you see Mr. Craddock ask him to tell you about his bad luck."

"My dear, what a question for me to put to a gentleman I've never seen before."

"It's a story he was going to tell me and Martin, but he was called away. I want to know what it was about."

"We haven't seen anything of Martin lately," said Mr. Denston. "He used to be always popping in and out, but now he seems to be giving us the cold shoulder."

The words were lightly spoken, but they made Joan feel uncomfortable. Sooner or later, if this wretched quarrel were not made up, it would come to the knowledge of the older generation; then questions would be asked, and things made generally unpleasant. To mask her face, which she feared might betray her thoughts, she lifted her cup and slowly swallowed half a dozen sips of tea.

"Is he on the sick list?" asked Mr. Denston.

"Oh no, he was on the field watching the game this afternoon," replied Hugh. "Father, I wish you could see Torling. He plays left wing three-quarter for the Schoolhouse, and the same place in the Fifteen. I think he's one of the fastest men we've ever had."

The match was being discussed at other tea-tables, notably those in the dining-hall at the Schoolhouse, where every one was in high spirits. They had held the cup for two seasons, and intended that the trophy should adorn their sideboard for at least another twelve months. If the Day-boys won, then the cup would stand on a bracket in the Big School, but this simply must not be allowed. Their rather too easy victory over Pratt's greatly elated all the younger members of the School-

house community, who saw no reason why the same thing should not happen at the final. They retired to rest confident of success, and on Monday were still suffering from what is sometimes described as "swelled head."

"Schoolhouse for ever," chortled Fawcett as the Lower Fifth were trooping off to their classrooms for the commencement of morning school.

"Rats!" cried Pollard. "I'll bet you the Day-boys will simply romp round your crush, my young friend."

"No, they won't."

"Oh yes, they will."

The dispute continued as the Form surged into their classroom, and took their seats awaiting the arrival of Mr. Dolphin. Quite half of them were day-boys, while members of Hornby's and Pratt's, with a clan feeling as boarders, were inclined to support the Schoolhouse.

"You needn't think you'll win just because Winter will be playing for you," scoffed Fawcett. "He's about the only man you day-boys have got who's worth anything."

"Don't you open your mouth so wide," bayed Hampson. "What are you Schoolhouse chaps worth—take the lot in this room? Not one of you in the team, whereas we've got Denston."

"He's no good," said Page of Hornby's.

"Denston no good! that just shows the rot you're talking. Denston's a jolly good man. Worth any two of the Schoolhouse pack."

"Yah! I wouldn't give tu'pence for him."

"He's not for sale. I daresay the Schoolhouse would be glad enough to buy him if he was."

Hugh grinned as he listened to this frank discussion of his merits, but it struck him that he had suddenly come to be regarded as the most important man in the

class, of more importance even than Fox. He felt rather as if he had been hoisted shoulder high on a very rickety chair which might overbalance. What if he should be off colour on the day of the final? What if at a critical moment he bungled a pass and made a present of the ball to a hostile three-quarter?

"Good old Denston!" cried Pollard.

There were cheers and counter-cheers. Only one fellow in the room remained silent. Ludmoor sat lolling back against the desk behind him with his lips twisted into a smile which looked a bit scornful. He was vexed at seeing another fellow in the limelight, a position which he had always wished to occupy himself. It was absurd to make all this fuss of a fellow simply because he had been chosen to play in a house team.

"If you think Denston is any use to you, then you are welcome to him," declared Fawcett.

The dispute was brought to an end by the entrance of Mr. Dolphin, but during class-time Pollard composed a speech which would simply pulverize Fawcett, while Hampson prepared a remark with which to demolish Page. These verbal explosives were let off in the quad during break. A dozen members of the Upper Fourth were drawn into the fray; day-boys and boarders formed themselves into a sort of blind scrummage, a joyful rough-and-tumble in the course of which two fountain pens and the glass of Page's watch were broken. Both sides claimed a victory; there was no bad blood, though Hampson declared that some one had bitten his ear—a complaint which was received with shouts of laughter.

Contrary to his usual behaviour on such occasions, Ludmoor watched the conflict from a distance. As a rule, it was his aim to become the "big noise" in any

kind of rag; but since he had taken no part in this dispute when it began, his pose now was to ignore it as a game too feeble to interest a person like himself. He did not mean to break off his friendship with Hugh, but it might be just as well to show him that there was some one in the class who was not going to bow down to him simply because he had been chosen to play in the Day-boy Fifteen. It had become a habit for the two to walk part of the way home together, but on this particular day at dinner-time Ludmoor dashed off as if to catch a train, and the same thing happened when afternoon school came to an end.

Hugh rather wondered what could be the meaning of this haste, but he was quite content to be left on his lonesome, as he had undertaken to run an errand in consequence of a request made at dinner-time by Joan.

"Be a sport and go round by Burke's, the boot-maker in Tower Street, on your way home," she had pleaded. "Ask him for the black walking-shoe of mine which he promised to put on a last because the toe has been pinching. I want to wear it to-morrow, and it's twice the distance from St. Catharine's to Tower Street than it is from King's School."

Hugh tramped off to Tower Street, where Burke produced the shoe, and explained the treatment it had received.

"Oh, don't trouble to wrap it up," said the boy impatiently; "I'll stick it in my pocket."

He swung out of the shop, indifferent to the fact that the toe of the shoe could be seen sticking out of his overcoat pocket. Now that he was in Tower Street, he might as well have a look at Anderson's. He jogged on, and presently halted before a big plate-glass window which never failed to attract the notice of any passing member

of the King's School. In it were to be seen engines and rolling stock for "O" or "I" gauge railways, Meccano outfits, electric torches and batteries, model steamboats, wireless sets and all the parts required by any person who chose to set up his own aerial and receiver.

Hugh studied this display in the brilliantly lighted window, trying to decide what he would buy if he had a pound—two pounds—FIVE POUNDS to spend. It was not until he chanced to turn his head, that he became aware of a lad who had for some moments been hovering behind him as if undecided whether to speak or not. Their eyes met, and the glare from the shop revealed the features of Bramble, the defaulting treasurer of the Excelsior Football Club.

Hugh was not afraid of Bramble, but he had no wish for the latter to start some argument about the meeting in Jason's stable, and he breathed more freely when the treasurer suddenly spun round on his heel and walked away.

"That chap's a queer customer," thought Hugh. "Looked as if he meant to tell me something, then changed his mind."

He and Martin had both decided to make a wireless receiver in the Christmas holidays, and he entered the shop to get some idea what this project would cost. Anderson was disengaged, and very readily devoted ten minutes to giving information and advice.

"Thanks," said Hugh; "I think we ought to be able to manage it, and I'll call in again as soon as the holidays have begun."

Then came a queer incident, though one which seemed to him so trivial that he never even told Joan about it when they sat gossiping after tea. His homeward journey led him past the Parish Church, the old grave-

yard of which, enclosed with high iron railings, was intersected by a flagged footpath dimly lit by the street lamps at each end. Hugh turned into this path, and walked on thinking about the wireless set, and unconscious of the fact that some one was following him with quick and lengthy strides. Almost before he realized what was happening, an arm had been flung roughly round his neck, Joan's shoe was wrenched out of his pocket, and his assailant dashed off, making for the road.

A parting shove had sent Hugh staggering against the iron railings, and it was a moment before he recovered his balance.

"I say—bring that back!" he shouted.

Rather to his surprise the call was obeyed. The raider, who had nearly reached the end of the footpath, halted, then turned and walked back. In the gloom nothing could be seen of him but the outline of his figure, which was that of a young man nearly six feet in height. He appeared to be wearing a trench coat, belted at the waist, and with collar turned up to his ears. The upper part of his face was completely hidden by the brim of a felt hat. He came to within a dozen paces of Hugh, then stopped.

"Sorry, mister," he apologized with a laugh; "I mistook you for a pal of mine. Here—catch!"

In the darkness it was not easy to give or take a catch; the shoe fell a yard short, and by the time Hugh had picked it up from the flagstones the raider was gone.

"Cad!" growled Hugh. "Rotten, silly trick to play—sort of joke these hooligans think is funny."

The shoe had not been damaged, and he thrust it into his pocket.

"Great Scott!" he chuckled as he stepped on along



An arm had been flung roughly round his neck.

the path. "When he stuck his arm round my neck I thought it was that chap I saw hanging about outside Anderson's shop."

Bramble, however, was at that moment standing in a dark alley which had its opening on a side street some ten minutes' walk from the Parish Church. He leant against an iron post, now and again softly whistling snatches of some rag-time tune. Suddenly he became alert as some

one swung round the corner and entered the alley at a trot.

"Hullo, Shard!" hailed Bramble. "Got it?"

The young man who a few minutes earlier had picked Hugh's pocket, advanced like an angry dog.

"Got it," he snarled. "You idiot, it wasn't the black cat he had with him—it was a leather shoe. I pinched it; then, when I felt what it was, I tossed it back."

"Are you sure it was the same chap?" gasped Bramble.

"It was the chap you pointed out to me, as he stood by the counter talking to Anderson. I followed him as he came out of the shop. All he'd got was this blinking shoe."

"I could have sworn it was the head of that cat I saw sticking out of his pocket. That's just how he was carrying it when I saw him take it out and show it to some friend of his as they were going home from the King's School."

"Why didn't you snatch it out of his hand?"

"How could I? It was two to one, and there were plenty more people up and down the street who'd have got in my way if there'd been a shout of 'Stop thief!' I did all I could. As I've told you already, I followed that bloke all the way home, and slipped in after him through the front gate, and round to a shed at the back of the house."

"Are you sure it was our cat he'd got with him?"

"'Course I am. I could see it through the window as plain as anything—saw the green ribbon round its neck. There was a girl with him—must be his sister; they'd got a lamp burning in the shed. He gave her the cat after they'd talked about it for a bit, and the last thing

she did with it before they put out the light was to stick it on a shelf."

"I wish I'd been there," cried Shard with an oath.

"Don't see you could have done more than I did," grumbled Bramble. "As soon as they'd gone I forced a window-catch back with my knife, and got into the shed. But I couldn't find it, so they must have took it with them to the house."

"You blazing fool! did you prig anything?"

"No fear, but I smashed a china dish—knocked it off the shelf when feeling about in the dark for that cat."

"They might have moved it when you weren't looking, and left it in some other place in the shed."

"I struck matches and had a look round, but it was gone right enough. They'd taken it with 'em indoors. I couldn't follow them into the bloomin' house, could I?"

Shard muttered something below his breath.

"His name's Denston," continued Bramble. "I got that from a chap I know called Cole."

"And you say his house is the next one to Netherby?"

"That's right."

There was a silence.

"If he gets messing about with that cat, he'll do us in," growled Shard. "If he gets showing it to people, some one may see it who'll know what it is. Then the whole scheme's bust. It'll be like putting a match to a train of gunpowder."

CHAPTER XII

SALE BY AUCTION

THOUGH Hugh said nothing to Joan about his adventure in the churchyard, on the following day he overtook Ludmoor on the way to afternoon school, and told him the whole story.

"The police ought to put a stop to horse-play of that kind," he concluded. "Who the fellow was I've no idea."

"Oh, it was that chap Bramble," laughed Ludmoor. "He saw you outside Anderson's shop, and followed you down that footpath. You should have hit him in the eye; that's what I should have done. I was quite ready for him the other night in that stable. If he'd started any rough stuff with me, I should have knocked him silly."

"It wasn't Bramble. As I've told you, the fellow was a good bit taller than Bramble."

"Well, whoever it was, as soon as you felt him grab at your pocket you should have hit him in the eye."

Hugh made no reply. He did not relish what sounded like a reflection on his pluck. Since Ludmoor had never entered any of the school boxing-contests and so shown proficiency in the use of the gloves, it was not likely he would have struck out instantly with his fists when set upon by an adversary much taller than himself.

"You must have pretty big pockets," said Ludmoor; "I don't think I could get a shoe into one of mine."

He thrust his hand into one of his overcoat pockets as if to test its capacity. "Hullo," he murmured, "what have I got here? Oh, I know."

As he spoke he produced a large brown cracker, though such things had disappeared from the windows of the firework shops some weeks ago. "See that," he laughed; "an echo of the Fifth."

"Where did you get it?" growled Hugh.

"Oh, I had some fireworks at home on the Fifth, and this is the only one left. I found it when I was hunting for something after dinner."

"I should chuck it away," snapped Hugh. "You are a fool to bring a thing of that kind with you."

A rule of the King's School decreed that no boy should let off fireworks within the school precincts. In brave days of old it had been quite usual on the evening of the Fifth for the quad to be illuminated with the glare of coloured fire and the trail of flying squibs, but nearly twenty years ago one of the boarders had ventured to let off a big rocket in the Schoolhouse garden. The rocket, which must have been tilted at the moment it was lit, had gone clean through the glass of one of the bedroom windows, and nearly set the place on fire. Since this mishap fireworks of all kinds had been strictly forbidden.

"Chuck it away," repeated Hugh.

"My dear chap, I'm not going to let it off at the school. No, I may have a lark with it on my way home—stick it in some one's letter box."

"Well, don't get showing it to any one in class, or Dolphin will spot it, and you'll get in a beastly row."

Ludmoor nodded, and dropped the cracker into his pocket.

"I suppose you think I was going to put it in the stove," he chuckled. "No; I shouldn't have brought

the blessed thing with me, only I happened to pick it up just as I was coming away from the house."

Rain had been threatening all day, and it was descending in a steady downpour when the afternoon's work came to an end. The school dispersed with a rush, the boarders who had not far to go making a quick dash for their houses. A few of the day-boys, who had come provided with mackintoshes and umbrellas, chose to brave the storm, but the majority sought places of refuge where they might shelter till the worst of the deluge was past. Hugh and Ludmoor found themselves rubbing shoulders in the entrance to the cloakroom.

"Don't see any sense in getting soaked," growled the latter. "Let's hike off down into the crypt—better than standing here."

"I'm going to the reading-room," Hugh decided. "There are the Christmas numbers of some of the magazines I want to see."

"Don't go there. I doubt if you'll get a seat, as the place is sure to be crammed."

"Perhaps so; but I'll have a shot anyway."

Turning up his collar, Hugh plunged out into the darkness, and sped across the quad. The reading-room was fuller than usual, but he managed to find an empty chair beside one occupied by Winter, who greeted him with a friendly nod.

"Wait till the clouds roll by," murmured the skipper. "If I'd known this was coming I'd have borrowed a suit of oil-skins."

The crypt might be described as a vast cellar with a cement floor, and the roof supported by stone pillars. It formed the basement of the Big School, and entrance to it could be gained by a sloping path at the west end of the building. In the dark ages the crypt had been the

school gymnasium ; now it served as a storage place for the day-boys' bicycles. During break, in bad weather, it was a favourite resort of members of the Lower School, who used it as a covered playground.

On this particular evening a score or more day-boys had dashed into the crypt seeking refuge from the rain. The majority had drifted into groups, and stood talking ; one ardent scholar was endeavouring to begin his prep work by the flickering light of a single gas-jet ; away in the semi-darkness at the end of the cellar a clatter of feet, and shadowy figures dodging round the pillars, showed that some game of " tig " was in progress.

Perkin, a sprightly member of the Middle Fifth, had been oiling his bicycle, and was in the act of returning his oil-can to his tool-bag when he became aware that a small boy was hovering about by his side. Geach was not popular with his comrades in the Lower Fourth. His nature was in keeping with his face, which was rather like that of a ferret. Class-mates thought it wise to steer clear of Geach, since he was quick to take offence, and given to nursing any real or fancied grievance till he saw a chance of getting his own back, if possible with compound interest.

" I say," he chirped, " d'you want to buy a camera ? "

He held up what looked like an oblong black box, with a handle attached to the lid.

" What the deuce d'you suppose any one wants with a camera at this time of the year ? " demanded Perkin.

" Give it away to some one for a Christmas present," suggested Geach.

Perkin took the camera, and examined it with a look of astonishment ; then, with an up-and-down movement of his arm, he tested the weight.

" Where did you get this old relic ? " he demanded.

"I should think it dates back to the beginning of the last century."

"It's not the latest pattern, I know," admitted Geach.

"It's good pre-war stuff, my boy; such things aren't made now."

"I should think not. If any tradesman put a thing like that in his window, people would throw bricks and smash the glass. How does it open?"

Geach turned a catch, and raised a hinged lid; his companion gazed into the camera, then raised it to within a few inches of his nose and sniffed.

"Have you been using this as a cage for white mice?" he asked.

"No, of course I haven't."

"It smells a bit musty—old age, I suppose. What's the good of all this empty space?"

"That's for the carriers; you use quarter-plates—jolly sight more reliable than films."

"And where are the carriers?"

"Oh, there aren't any—I mean I've lost 'em. But you can easily get fresh carriers at any shop where they sell photographic materials."

"I see—I see," purred Perkin. "Some of the works are missing. Well, what are you asking for what's left?"

"What are you inclined to offer?" asked Geach eagerly.

"Let's see—it's got a lens, and I suppose this arrangement works the shutter. Pull out this bellows to get your focus, eh? I'll give you—no, I won't—yes, I will—I'll give you fourpence, or with discount for cash down, threepence three-farthings."

"Get away!" wailed Geach. "Give it back. Why, I'll bet you the lens alone is worth half a sovereign."

Perkin shook his head. Though his face was solemn

enough, he fancied that a little harmless amusement might be derived from the camera. He shut the lid, and the slide which covered the lens, then spoke as if struck with a sudden thought.

“ Sure you want to sell it ? ”

“ Yes, of course I do.”

“ The best way to get rid of a thing of this kind is to put it up for auction. I’ll do it for you if you like.”

“ When ? ”

“ Now—straight away. There might be some chap here who wants a camera. Anyway, it’s worth trying ; and you shall give me ten per cent. commission—say tu’pence in the shilling. You can put a reserve price on it, if you like ; then, if no one will give that much, try again to-morrow.”

Geach looked more cheerful ; this sounded more like business.

“ All right,” he agreed. “ I’ll give you ten per cent. commission. As for the reserve price, I’m not going to let the thing go for less than five bob.”

Perkin advanced a few paces along the floor of the crypt, then began to yell at the top of his voice like a man in mortal agony.

“ Oh yes !—Oh yes !—Oh yes ! ” he bawled.

The hum of conversation ceased, and the distant scamper of feet died away into silence as the “ tig ” players ceased in their game, wondering what was up.

“ OH YES !—OH YES !—OH YES ! ” yelled Perkin.

“ I say, Perky, what’s the matter with you ? ” called a voice. “ Have you been drinking your lamp oil, or have you gone mad ? ”

An old packing-case which the school porter intended to break up for firewood had been left lying beside one of the pillars. Perkin dragged it out into the open to serve

as a platform. As he mounted it, the box creaked ominously beneath his weight.

"Look out!" exclaimed Geach. "That beastly thing isn't safe."

"It's all right—safe as houses," was the reply. "Walk up, gentlemen!—walk up!—WALK UP!"

The crowd of storm-bound day-boys obeyed the summons, forming a circle round the box, quite ready to enjoy any entertainment which Perkin saw fit to provide.

"Sale by auction," he announced. "Those of you who have catalogues will see that Lot 1 consists of a valuable camera, quarter-plate, hand-sewn, jewelled in six places, and warranted——"

"You can't do that, Perky," interrupted Reeves. "You haven't got an auctioneer's licence. You're about to commit a felony, my boy, and you'll get yourself run in."

"Then I'll sell it by Dutch auction—any one can do that. Start with a price, and go on lowering it till I get a bid. The first chap who winks or nods his head gets the prize."

As the last words were spoken Ludmoor stepped into the crypt, his entrance not being noticed by the crowd assembled round the auctioneer. The new-comer halted, wiping the raindrops from his face, and curious to learn what was going on before he himself decided to take a hand in the game.

"This camera is good, pre-war stuff," proclaimed Perkin. "Not like the modern rubbish turned out by profiteers. It'll take portraits, landscapes, seascapes, or fire-escapes—interiors or exteriors—time or instantaneous. Now to give you a start—what shall I say? I'll say two pounds."

There was a shriek of laughter.

“One pound nineteen shillings—one pound eighteen—seventeen—sixteen.”

The auctioneer tucked the camera under his arm, and heaved a sigh.

“Do you fellows think I’m going to *give* this thing away?” he demanded. “You stand there like a lot of——”

There was a creak, and the platform wobbled as if on the point of collapse. The auctioneer staggered, and with some difficulty recovered his balance.

“Better stand on the camera, and sell the box,” a voice suggested.

“Let’s see—where was I?” resumed Perkin. “Oh, I know—one pound sixteen shillings for the camera—*fifteen*. Don’t all speak at once—the camera for thirty-five shillings.”

“Make it farthings,” said Reeves. “I don’t say I shall give you a bid, but I might.”

“Farthings!” cried Geach indignantly. “Why, the lens alone is worth ten bob.”

Ludmoor, now tired of being an idle spectator, prepared to join the crowd with a rush which would turn the sale into a scrummage; then it struck him that perhaps a better way to start a rag would be to turn out the light. The gas jet was not more than half a dozen paces from where he stood; he crept towards it on tip-toe, then realizing that no one was aware of his presence in the crypt, a still brighter thought flashed into his mind. He glanced over his shoulder, and carefully measured the distance between himself and the door.

“You chaps are all half asleep,” complained Perkin. “Do wake up!”

There was no need for him to repeat the plea, for the

next moment with a *bang—flash—bang* a cracker dropped into the middle of the crowd, throwing it instantly into wild confusion. A small boy lost his footing, and two more fell over him as he lay prostrate on the ground. The auctioneer started violently, and immediately his platform gave way beneath him with a crash. The camera flew from his hand as he plunged head first into Reeves.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Save for the flashes from the exploding cracker the crypt was in darkness, since no sooner had Ludmoor made sure the touch-paper was burning than he had turned out the light. He had hurled his missile, and five seconds later was scampering across the quad.

Yells, cat-calls, and a scuffling of feet on the cement floor accompanied the noise of the cracker. It seemed to last for minutes. At last, with a final *bang*, the firework display came to an end. The tumult subsided, and was followed by a moment's silence. Then out of the darkness came a frantic cry from Geach.

"What's become of my camera?"

"I believe I've just trodden on a bit of it," replied a voice. "No, it isn't—feels more like a piece of coke."

"Where's my camera?" screamed Geach. "If that camera's broken some one will have to pay for it. Who's got any matches? Who's got a box of matches? Silly idiots, why can't one of you strike a light!"

Ludmoor had described his cracker as an echo of the Fifth, and an echo of what had happened in the crypt was heard next morning when Geach accosted him in the quad.

"Look here, I happened to turn my head just before you put out the gas in the crypt last night—yes, just



Bang ! Bang ! Bang !

before you chucked that cracker. Some ass jumped on my camera and smashed the lid, and you ought to pay for having it repaired."

"What the dickens are you talking about?" exclaimed Ludmoor. "I wasn't in the crypt last night—who says I was?"

"I do."

"And who else?"

"I suppose I'm the only chap who spotted you were there, but it was all your fault that my camera got smashed."

"Well, whoever you saw, or fancied you saw, it wasn't me," declared Ludmoor. "And look here, my young friend, if you go about saying that I've been letting off crackers in the crypt I'll smack your head. I know nothing about your camera, but if some one smashed it, he's the man who ought to pay."

Geach fumed with rage; he was practically certain that Ludmoor had thrown the cracker, but he realized that he had no one on whom he could call to support the charge.

"Don't stand making faces at me, you little snipe. Sling your hook."

Geach gulped as if he was swallowing an acid drop, then he turned on his heel and walked away.

"Liar," he muttered. "Beastly cad; I'll pay him out if I get the chance, see if I don't."

CHAPTER XIII

AN UNEXPECTED CONFESSION

PERKIN applied his brake, and stepping lightly from his machine on to the footpath faced round to greet the small boy he had just overtaken.

“Hullo, Geach!”

“Hullo,” was the reply, given in a tone which did not sound at all genial.

Wednesday being a half-holiday, day-boys now on their homeward way with the prospect of a free afternoon before them should have been merry and bright, yet Geach looked as if he had just swallowed a gulp of sour milk. He was still brooding over his recent interview with Ludmoor.

“Look here, I’ll pay for the damage that was done to your camera,” said Perkin. “It was my fault.”

Geach’s face softened a little.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he growled. “It was the stupid ass who threw that cracker.”

“No one seems to know who did throw it.”

“Oh, I know.”

“Who was it, then?”

“It was that cad Ludmoor,” began Geach impulsively. “I happened to turn my head, and spotted him just as he lit the cracker and turned out the gas. I’ll swear it was Ludmoor, but you’d better not let him know I’ve told you.”

"Why not?"

"I tackled Ludmoor this morning. I said I'd seen him, and that he ought to pay for my camera. He got in a rage, and swore he'd never been near the crypt last night—said if I went about telling fellows it was he who let off that cracker he'd give me a hiding. It's a beastly lie—it was his doing. He's the biggest liar in the school."

"So you think it was Ludmoor?"

"I'm sure it was."

"And he means to keep it dark, eh?"

"He'd tell lies till he was black in the face."

Perkin laughed; he knew Ludmoor quite well, and would not have trusted his word for a moment.

"You won't let him know I told you?" said Geach.

"No, I won't tell him. As for that rag, I think the less said the better. If it gets talked about we shall all get in a beastly row."

"I don't see why we should. There was no harm in offering my camera for sale, and it was Ludmoor who turned the auction into a rag."

"Just so, but if the Head ever got to know some one had let off a cracker he'd be furious. It would remind him of that bother there was because somebody told him that one of the day-boys had stopped a train. He wouldn't rest till he had the names of all the fellows who were in the crypt. He'd come down on the whole lot of us as being mixed up in the game, whether Ludmoor owned up or not. You may be pretty sure Ludmoor would stick to what he told you this morning, and, as you are the only chap who saw him, it would be your word against his. Probably the Head would give him the benefit of the doubt."

Geach nodded. He had no wish to get a whole crowd

of fellows into a row, himself included. It might mean the loss of a half-holiday.

"I let your camera fall," said Perkin, "so I'll pay."

Under ordinary circumstances Geach would have jumped at the offer, but for a moment he hesitated. He never forgot an injury, and he had it firmly fixed in his mind that Ludmoor was the person who ought to be penalized. Still, Perkin could very well afford to pay. He always had money in his pocket; the bicycle he was riding was one of the latest pattern; every one knew that his father had made a big fortune and was "simply rolling."

"It's jolly good of you. It wasn't your fault, but if you really wish——"

"Of course I do. Take the camera to Wenmouth; he'll get it repaired for you if he can't do the job himself. When it's finished I'll call round with you and pay the bill."

Perkin turned to mount his bicycle, then paused with his foot on the pedal as a parting remark came from the pavement.

"He's a beastly cad," said Geach.

"Who—Wenmouth? I've always found him a decent chap to deal with."

"Oh, Wenmouth's all right—I mean Ludmoor. I'll pay him out some day."

"You'd better leave him alone," advised Perkin. "Give him enough rope and he'll hang himself some day, and save you the trouble. So-long."

The subject of this prophecy was at that moment strolling along Tower Street with Hugh Denston at his side. Both had a small purchase to make at Rodman's the ironmonger.

"Might as well cross over," said Ludmoor; then, as

he reached the edge of the pavement, he stopped. "Look at that," he muttered.

The street being one of the oldest in the town was rather narrow. Nearly opposite to where the two boys were standing was Rodman's shop, and out of it had just stepped the infamous Bramble, followed an instant later by Shard. They stood for a moment talking; then, as they parted, Shard called out what sounded like a reminder of some appointment.

"Three o'clock. Shan't be later; but if I am, you can wait."

Hugh pricked up his ears. The voice sounded familiar, and that trench-coat and felt hat reminded him instantly of the figure he had glimpsed in the dark.

"I say," he muttered, "I'm pretty sure that's the man who stopped me the other night by the Parish Church."

"Not unlikely," returned Ludmoor. "He's a pretty bad lot."

"Why, d'you know him?"

"I've seen his face; I could swear to it any day," was the rather evasive reply. "Come on, let's get across or we shall be splashed by that lorry."

They crossed the road, and spent five minutes in the shop, during which time the sight of Bramble and his pal was forgotten. But it flashed back into Hugh's mind when he was once more in the street.

"Look here," he began, "why should that fellow have barged into me, and snatched that shoe out of my pocket?"

"I expect he thought it was a black leather case, and might have some money in it," replied Ludmoor. "I should say he's ready for anything, from picking pockets to——"

The speaker clicked his tongue, then lowering his voice to a confidential tone he added : " You remember that complaint the stationmaster made to Alwing ? Well, it was that fellow who stopped the train."

" How d'you know ? "

" Because I saw him do it."

Ludmoor was always boasting of things he had seen or done, and as often as not there was no truth in these wild tales.

" Oh, don't talk such rot," said Hugh impatiently.

" It's quite true. I suppose I can count on you not to let this go any further—promise you won't. Then I'll tell you just what happened."

The pair divided to avoid a perambulator which was being pushed along the pavement, then they strolled on again side by side.

" That night," began Ludmoor, " after I'd finished my home-work, the gov'nor asked me to take a message to one of the men about something that was to be done early in the morning. I was coming back along the Chelfield Road when, about twenty yards ahead, I saw a man doing something on top of the embankment ; it was dark, but his figure stood out against the sky-line. I was walking slowly, and when I got within a few paces of the road lamp this fellow came hopping down the bank, and that's when I saw his face."

" Are you sure it was the same man ? "

" Positive ; and Bramble must have been the chap who was with him, but his back was turned to me all the time, so I never saw his face. The pair of them stood there a few yards up the embankment, as if they were waiting for something, and I wondered what they were about. I stopped, and as I stood watching them I heard some one walk past behind me—must have

been old Priest. A train was coming, and as it went by there was a *bang-bang* as if some one had let off a double-barrelled gun. I can tell you I ran for all I was worth. I guessed at once what those fellows had been doing—out of sheer devilry they'd put a couple of fog-signals on the line."

"But why didn't you tell Winter?" gasped Hugh, in blank astonishment. "If you knew it wasn't one of our fellows, why didn't you say so when we had that inquiry in the gym?"

"I wasn't going to get myself into a beastly row," returned Ludmoor. "I didn't know who those two other chaps were, so I couldn't have said who was to blame."

"You could have said it wasn't one of our fellows."

"My good man, do be sensible. If I'd let out that I was standing by the embankment when the thing happened, Alwing would have thought the other two were King's School day-boys—the idea Priest got into his head. Then I should have been put on the rack to make me give up the names of the two day-boys who were with me that night in Chelfield Road. Besides, all the fellows would have thought it was I myself put those detonators on the line; they'd say it was just the sort of thing I should do for a lark."

"Yes, I suppose they would," said Hugh. "And they'd be all the more inclined to think it was you after the game you got up to yesterday. Why were you such a fool as to let that cracker off down in the crypt last night?"

"Who said it was me?"

"No one; but you showed me the cracker yourself, and I guessed it was your doing as soon as I heard how that auction ended."

"It was stupid of me, I'll admit," said Ludmoor. "It was a sort of impulse that seized me all of a moment. Promise me you won't repeat what I've been telling you. Well, here's my turning, so good-bye, old chap. I know you're safe."

Hugh walked on deep in thought. He had an unpleasant feeling as if he were standing on thin ice. He might be "safe," but Ludmoor was dangerous, both to himself and to other people.

"I wish I'd never made friends with that chap," Hugh pondered. "I'll break it off as soon as I get the chance."

CHAPTER XIV

TREASURE TROVE

ALL the way home Hugh kept turning over in his mind the surprising story he had just heard. He tried to put himself in Ludmoor's shoes, and was half inclined to think there was some excuse for the latter's conduct.

It was only fair to admit that Ludmoor had not gone to the Chelfield Road with any idea of playing pranks on the railway. It had been his misfortune that he should have been standing by the embankment just before the detonators exploded, and it was another stroke of hard luck that Priest should have come along and recognized the King's School cap.

"I believe I should have done the same thing as he did," thought Hugh. "He knew there was bound to be a row, and, as there was no reason why he should be mixed up in it, he cleared off as fast as he could."

It was unfortunate also that, as a result of the stationmaster's complaint, Mr. Alwing should have been led to understand that the three persons concerned in the outrage had all been members of the school. If, at the inquiry in the gym, Ludmoor had admitted that he was the person seen by Priest, then he would at once have been called upon to name the two fellows who had been on the embankment—a question which he would have been unable to answer. His inability to do so would have been mistaken for a refusal to betray his

friends. There would have been a fearful row, all the day-boys, except perhaps the great men in the Sixth, and youngsters in the lowest Forms, would have been suspected, questioned, and generally harassed till life would not have been worth living. No, Ludmoor had good reason for holding his tongue, and perhaps it was the wisest thing he could have done.

But in the afternoon, when the call of "no side" brought a hard-fought practice game of rugger to an end, Hugh was no longer satisfied with the conclusion he had come to before dinner. There was something in the brave atmosphere of the playing-field out of harmony with all forms of cowardice and deceit. The King's School day-boys were still under a cloud, as a good many people had heard Priest's story, and it had been repeated by all the street-corner gossips in the town. It was not fair that the reputation of a whole community of good fellows should be lowered when one person had it in his power to show that they were in no way to blame. It was not "playing the game."

"Ludmoor ought to have owned up," thought Hugh as he left the field. "He ought to have done it as soon as the question was asked in the gym."

There seemed no reason now to doubt that such a good sportsman as Winter and so just a man as the Head would not have believed the story had it been told frankly, and at the proper time. They would have recognized courage and honesty, and been ready to accept the confession as correct.

"If it ever comes out that Ludmoor was mixed up in the business he'll get in a frightful row," pondered Hugh. "Even if he tried to put the blame on Bramble and that other blackguard, they'd simply swear that they'd never been near the railway that night, and knew noth-

ing about the stopping of the train. The Head would never believe Ludmoor's story because he's been keeping it back when he should have told it at the start. I wish he hadn't told me. It may come out some time that I knew, and kept it to myself. You never know where you are when you are dealing with Ludmoor. I shall chuck the fellow ; I've had enough of his foolery."

Having reached this decision, it began to dawn on Hugh that, if he wished to steer clear of Ludmoor, the best thing would be for him to renew his old companionship with Martin. To make up the quarrel would be an easy matter and could be done any time, but to break off friendly relations with Ludmoor might prove more difficult. For one thing, Ludmoor had an uncommonly thick skin ; more than once his tall stories had been ridiculed by the Lower Fifth, but he did not seem to care in the least ; he was about the last person in the world who might be expected to take a hint. On the other hand, it was impossible suddenly to round on a pal, smack his face, and tell him to find some one else with whom to walk home from school. No, the only way was to steer clear of him until he saw, as he must see before long, that his company was no longer desired.

Hugh was still thinking out a sort of plan of campaign for dodging Ludmoor when he reached home, and changed from his footer war-paint into his ordinary clothes. Coming downstairs he met Joan in the hall, and they drifted into the breakfast-room.

"Mother's been to call on Mrs. Craddock," said Joan. "Look, she sent me this—wasn't it kind of her ? "

The gift was a funny little pin-cushion, a tiny doll and a bag of sawdust shaped like a dress when crinolines were worn. Hugh viewed it with no great interest ; to

him the production of such trifles seemed a waste of time.

"She's made a lot to give away at Christmas-time instead of just sending a card," Joan continued. "She said if I would like to make some she would show me how, as it's quite easy. Mother said she was sure I should be glad to have a lesson, so I'm going down to have tea at Shipston one evening next week."

"Well, so long as you don't give one of them to me for a present, I don't mind how many you make," said Hugh.

"I'm going to give you a little tin motor-car that you can pull about behind you at the end of a string," promised Joan. "By the way, Mrs. Craddock said she'd like to see you again, if you care to come with me."

"I've never seen her ; shouldn't know who she was if I met her in the street."

"She thought Martin was my brother," laughed Joan. "Mother had to explain that he was a cousin. I believe Mrs. Craddock means to invite us all three to a party in the holidays."

There was a pause while the girl smoothed out the tissue paper in which the pin-cushion had been wrapped.

"I do think it's silly of you two boys to keep up this quarrel," she sighed. "Why can't you shake hands and be friends again ? What's it going to be like at Christmas if you and Martin won't speak to each other ?"

"Oh, I daresay we shall bury the hatchet during the holidays," replied Hugh. "If you make any of those pin-cushions, I'll send him one as a peace offering."

"I'm sure Martin is willing to be friends again if you are," said Joan decidedly. "If you'd only put your pride in your pocket, and say you were sorry if the row was your fault, the whole thing would be finished and

done with. I should speak to him to-morrow if I were you."

Hugh thrust his hand into his trousers pocket, and stood jingling some odd coppers and a bunch of keys. He knew that it would be all the easier for him to break off with Ludmoor if he had Martin once more for a chum. But Martin detested Ludmoor, and would flatly refuse to be friendly with any one who was Ludmoor's ally. Hugh hated the thought of a fresh rebuff. It would be better not to approach his cousin till he had got rid of Ludmoor.

"Why don't you make it up with Martin to-morrow?" asked Joan.

"Oh, it's no good rushing it," was the reply. "You can't expect me to dash at the fellow, and fling myself into his arms. I'll speak to him when I get the chance."

Hugh was up and dressed in good time next morning, and ate his breakfast as if he were hurrying to catch a train. He had now quite made up his mind to break off his friendship with Ludmoor; and, to avoid meeting the latter on the way to school, he meant to start earlier than usual. He had put on his cap and overcoat, and with his books tucked under his arm was making for the front door, when his mother called to him from the dining-room.

"Hugh, come here a minute; there's something I want you to do for me."

Mr. Denston was away from home on business, and not expected to return before evening. Joan sat finishing a round of toast.

"I suppose I can trust you to do this," began Mrs. Denston, who was standing by a small writing table. "I should have asked your father if he'd been home, and I

don't want to go out myself to-day, as I think I've caught a cold."

"All right, mother ; what is it ? " interrupted the boy impatiently.

"I want you to get me two postal orders, one for a pound and one for ten shillings. Here are two treasury notes for the amount, and you can pay for the poundage out of this sixpence. Perhaps I'd better put the notes in an envelope, which will be better than for you to have them loose in your pocket."

"I'll call round at the General Post Office as I come home for dinner," promised Hugh. "I shouldn't have time to go there in 'break.' "

"Very well ; I want to send the orders off by the early post this afternoon."

Mrs. Denston put the two notes in an envelope, and sealed the gummed flap. She handed the packet to Hugh, who tucked it into the breast pocket of his overcoat.

"Be careful !—mind you don't lose it."

"Oh, that's all right—you needn't worry," laughed Hugh, and hurried out of the room.

There was no need for all this haste, since Ludmoor had overslept himself, and reached King's School only just in time to escape being marked late for assembly. Hugh felt vexed, and rather as if some one had made a fool of him. In class he kept casting furtive glances at Ludmoor, rather wishing he could think of some good excuse for a quarrel. Would it be any use to write the fellow a note, and tell him that the friendship was at an end ? No, that seemed rather feeble ; it was the sort of thing——

"Denston," called out Mr. Dolphin, "don't sit there half asleep. Get on with your work."

Hugh bent over his books, and began a fresh sentence of the exercise he was writing. When the bell rang for break he made a pretence of hunting for something in his desk while the rest of the class trooped out of the room. After loitering in the corridor for a few minutes he strolled out of doors for a breath of fresh air. As was usual at this time of the day, boys of all ages were moving about in the quad; here and there small parties of friends had collected in groups to exchange opinions on some subject of mutual interest. Bent on dodging Ludmoor, Hugh drifted towards a quiet corner by the gym, and here a curious sight met his eye.

There had been heavy rain in the night, and, owing to the fact that a grating had become choked with dead leaves and other refuse, the drainage from the roof had overflowed the gutter. Beside this pool crouched the youthful Geach, like some timid bather testing the temperature of the water before plunging in for a swim.

"You'd better look sharp and get your things off, if you mean to have a bathe," said Hugh.

"Get away," murmured Geach, "I'm busy."

"What d'you think you're doing—tickling trout?"

"I'm washing out my fountain pen," explained Geach. "See—this plunger works in and out like a squirt. I only gave a bob for it—saw a card of them in a shop window. I'll bet you it's some foreign stuff that's been dumped, and that's the reason why it's so cheap."

"You must be an unpatriotic young beast to encourage stuff being dumped on the home market," chuckled Hugh. "I'll bet it's rubbish."

"It's not; it's a jolly good pen—as good as one for which you'd pay half a guinea. I filled it with ink, but it wouldn't write because the nib was greasy, so now I'm giving it a wash."

"You ought to use warm water, and not that muddy soup."

Geach refused to accept this piece of advice. He stooped down, worked away with his pen for a few moments as if it were a miniature syringe, then paused, and rose to his feet.

"This plunger's stuck," he muttered. "Don't like to press the blessed thing too hard or it may break."

"I expect the barrel of that pen is half full of mud," said Hugh. "You'd better unscrew the nozzle. Mind what you're doing. You'll smash that squirt-handle if you aren't careful. Give it to me and I'll—*Pah!*"

Careless as to the direction in which his pen was pointed, Geach had given the plunger another vigorous push; the "squirt-handle" shot home with a click, and a jet of dirty water struck Hugh full in the face.

"You young beast!" he spluttered, "I believe you did that on purpose."

Snatching a handkerchief from his pocket he wiped his eyes, and opening them found that Geach had fled. Hugh dashed off in pursuit, then paused to mop his cheeks. He gave up the chase, and turned into the reading-room, to find that the magazines he wished to look at were all in use. "After you," he whispered to one of the readers, and flopped down into a chair. After no end of waiting he got hold of an illustrated daily paper, and had just settled down to look at the pictures when with a *clang, clang, clang* the bell sent forth its summons for a return to work.

This vexing waste of free time had been all Ludmoor's fault—at least so Hugh decided—and when morning school came to an end he made a bee-line for the cloakroom, seized his overcoat, and flung it on as he was crossing the

quad. No hail came from Ludmoor, who had evidently been out-paced. A few more doses of this same medicine would make the fellow see that his company was no longer desired. If he chose to cut up rough, so much the better.

"I shall tell him straight that I don't want to have anything more to do with him. I'll keep out of his way if he'll keep out of mine."

Five minutes' sharp walking brought Hugh to the Post Office ; he entered through the swing doors, and marched across to that part of the counter where a notice fastened to the latticed grille showed that this was the right place to ask for postal orders.

"Yes?" murmured the clerk, glancing up from some printed form which he was studying.

"I want a—er—I want——"

The boy's voice died away into silence. He had thrust his hand into his pocket, and there was nothing in it but a scrap of waste paper. In the name of Fortune what had become of that envelope? He tried his side pockets, then opening his overcoat searched every pocket in his clothes. Great Scott!——

"Lost anything?" inquired the clerk.

"I—er—I can't have brought it with me," stammered Hugh, his mind in such a state of confusion he hardly knew what he was saying.

He backed away from the counter, feeling that the eyes of everybody in the place were upon him; one rapid glance showed that what he sought was not lying on the floor, and the hope that he might find that he had dropped it after entering the office proved vain. He reached the vestibule, and there halted to collect his thoughts.

"What can have become of it?"

One thing was clear—that he had lost the money: a big sum—thirty shillings. There had been no name—no writing of any kind on the envelope in which the two notes had been enclosed, so if it had been dropped in the street there was little chance of ever seeing it again. And the prospect of going home to tell his mother he had lost the money was horrible. She would never trust him again.

“I’m sure I put it in my pocket,” moaned Hugh. “Some beggar must have cribbed it. What a dirty shame!”

But no fellow at the King’s School would prowl about like a common thief searching pockets in the cloakroom. It was impossible to imagine such a thing being done. He himself must have lost the envelope on his way to school—or, could it have escaped from his pocket as he snatched his overcoat from the peg?

Hugh started off at a run in the wild hope that he might find the lost treasure lying on the cloakroom floor. The quad was deserted when he raced in through the gates. He searched the expanse of gravel with his eye, but not so much as a scrap of paper was to be seen. In the cloakroom an overcoat was discovered hanging from one of the pegs, but of the missing notes there was no sign.

“I’ve done it,” groaned Hugh. “Thirty bob—simply chucked away.”

From without came the sound of some one whistling; footsteps clattered up a flight of stone steps, and Ludmoor strode into the room.

“Hullo, my little friend!” he cried. “What are you doing here?”

Without waiting for the question to be answered he stepped on to get his overcoat. “Been kept in to finish

a rotten exercise," he explained. "Just as I was leaving the classroom, Dolphin ordered me to stay behind."

The speaker jerked his arms through the sleeves of his coat; then, as he turned, he noticed his companion's woe-begone look.

"What's the matter—feeling sick?" he inquired with a laugh.

All Hugh's plan of campaign had been swept out of his mind by the discovery made at the Post Office. He was ready to drop into the arms of any one who might give him support.

"I've been a most awful fool," he began. "I was searching for something I've lost. It was a white envelope——"

"You needn't worry," interrupted Ludmoor carelessly. "I've got it."

"You've got it!" gasped Hugh, scarcely able to believe his own ears.

"I was hunting round the quad for you in break; then just when I spotted where you were, you chased off after young Geach. I walked past the place where you'd been standing, and saw something lying on the ground, so I picked it up, as I guessed it was yours."

In a moment Hugh remembered a hasty act of his own which he had clean forgotten. On arriving at the King's School that morning he had thought it safer to transfer the money from his overcoat to the breast-pocket of his jacket. When half blinded by the jet of rain-water he had snatched out his handkerchief, the envelope must have come with it, and fallen unnoticed on the gravel.

"Here you are," said Ludmoor. "I should have given it you sooner, but you scooted off after Geach, and I lost sight of you—couldn't find where you'd gone."



*" You needn't worry.
I've got it."*

Hugh seized the envelope as a drowning man might clutch at a rope.

" Thanks awfully," he said breathlessly. " I am glad you found it. Thanks, old chap; you deserve a medal."

" What is it ? " asked Ludmoor with a laugh. " Anything precious—a love letter ? "

" No fear; it's money—two treasury notes. The mater gave them to me to get some postal orders for her on my way home."

" Then it's lucky I picked it up, and that it wasn't left lying out there all the last hour we were in school. Of

course if any decent fellow had picked it up he'd have given it to the senior prefect to be cried as lost property ; but lots of people go across that quad while we're at work, chaps like errand boys, and if one of them had found thirty bob lying about he'd have simply stuck it in his pocket."

" I'm awfully much obliged to you."

" My dear man, I'm glad I found it," laughed Ludmoor. " Come on ; I'll walk with you as far as the Post Office, if that's where you're going."

" Right-o ! " said Hugh.

CHAPTER XV

A LOCAL LEGEND

So great was Hugh's relief at being able to hand his mother the postal orders, that the complete failure of his first attempt to give Ludmoor the cold shoulder seemed of no importance. He felt vexed, not with the finder of the lost treasure, but with himself for his carelessness in allowing the precious envelope to escape from his pocket.

Next day he might have made some fresh effort to carry out his plan, had his thoughts not been diverted by the increasing excitement about the final round for the football cup. Soon the question how he was to deal with Ludmoor, and hold out the olive branch to Martin, seemed problems which might very well stand over till after Wednesday, when the burden of his own share in the struggle would be off his mind.

The result of the match twelve months ago had been foreseen before the contest began, but this year the rival Fifteens were judged to be so evenly matched there was no knowing whether Schoolhouse or Day-boys would carry off the trophy. Partisans of both sides found it their duty to create a proper moral atmosphere by loudly declaring their firm belief that a great and glorious victory would be won by the wearers of the colours they themselves intended to display when they formed up along the touch-lines on the day of battle.

"I wish the fellows wouldn't make all this fuss about the footer final," sighed Cardwell, skipper of the Schoolhouse Fifteen. "It's getting on my nerves. I shall be a wreck by Wednesday."

He had brought Winter round to his own study during break to see some photographs sent by a mutual friend, now an Old Boy.

"It's getting on my nerves," he repeated.

"Knock off drinking tea," suggested Winter with a grin.

"My dear sir, I've not yet recovered from a shock I received a few minutes ago when I heard on good authority that the Day-boys are simply bound to win—that the Schoolhouse hasn't got an earthly."

"Oh! who's your good authority?"

"Young Geach; I heard him screaming it out at the top of his voice."

"Well, he knows more than I do," replied Winter solemnly.

Cardwell perched himself on the end of his study table, and sat swinging his legs, lost in thought. He pondered for a few moments, then his brain gave birth to a bright idea.

"Shall you and I toss for that cup?" he asked suddenly. "That would be a quick way of getting the matter settled, and of putting an end to all this excitement."

"It would end in a riot, and we should both be lynched by the mob," laughed Winter. "But I'll tell you this—I think it's a toss-up, even chances, who's going to be cock-house this year."

"Yes, that's what I think," admitted Cardwell. "In my opinion it's going to be a real tug of war. However——" The speaker seemed to have forgotten what

he meant to say ; he gazed at his companion in silence, then his face puckered with a smile.

“ Good old warrior ! ” he laughed. “ I know it will be positively your last appearance, as the play-bills say, and, ’pon my soul, for your sake I wish both sides could win.”

“ Then it would be a draw, and you fellows would hang on to the cup.”

“ I suppose we should. We might agree to let the Day-boys have the wooden plinth it stands on. I think it would look rather well on that bracket in the Big School.”

“ Not so well as the cup itself, and that’s where you’ll find it next term.”

Small boys could hardly be expected to discuss the coming struggle in the friendly spirit displayed by such great sportsmen as Winter and Cardwell. Tempers were so far lost by certain members of the Lower Fourth that, in the absence of their class-master, they nearly came to blows. The dispute arose from a rumour current in the Lower School that the mayor had announced his intention of being present at the final, and of handing the cup to the captain of the winning team. It was a great mistake, since all the mayor had said when speaking to one of the masters whom he chanced to meet in the town was that, if he could spare the time, he would like to walk down to the playing-field on Wednesday afternoon and see that match.

“ I call it beastly cheek,” piped Holly of the School-house. “ Mrs. Alwing presented the cup last year, and so she ought to this final. Jolly rude of old Studgrove to want to take her place.”

“ He’s only coming because some ass has told him the Day-boys are going to win,” declared Thane, another Schoolhouse junior. “ He was a day-boy himself, and

he wants to make a speech in which he'll tell us that the day-boys have always won everything."

Owen, who lived in the same road as the mayor, thought it time to come into action.

"Yah, you're shouting to keep your spirits up," he sneered.

"What d'you mean?"

"If you didn't keep on bleating you'd break down and weep. You're broken-hearted already at the thought that you're going to lose the cup on Wednesday."

There was a babel of voices crying "That's right!" and "No, it isn't!" A cherub in the school choir added to the tumult by rolling an exercise-book into the shape of a motor horn, and producing sounds which might have startled a whole street.

"It's like his cheek," cried Holly, returning to the subject of the mayor, and sadly forgetful of the fact that Mr. Studgrove had obtained an extra half-holiday for the school on becoming chief magistrate of the borough. "It's like his cheek, and I suppose he means to come wearing his cocked-hat and gold chain, and with all the councillors marching behind him like a bally circus procession."

"You're jealous because you haven't got a mayor in that potty little village where you come from," jeered Geach.

"We wouldn't have one as a gift," retorted Holly. "Why should we want a silly old Guy Fawkes like Studgrove?"

"Let him come if he likes," scoffed Thane. "Let him wear his cocked-hat and gold chain if he wants to. They'll only make him look a bigger fool when he finds he has to hand the cup to Cardwell."

"He couldn't look a bigger fool than you do, you cock-

eyed pup," stormed Owen. "Hand the cup to Cardwell! I'll come over and hand you a smack in the eye if you say another word."

"Another word!" cried Thane in a voice like a tin whistle.

Owen sprang to his feet, then sat down so violently that for the rest of the day he felt as if he had been pitched from a toboggan on to a particularly hard patch of frozen snow. The door had opened, and the class-master strode into the room.

"I told you boys to go on with your work," he growled. "I've a very good mind to keep you all in for an extra half-hour after school."

One boy there was who wished that such things as cock-house matches had never been invented. Since Ludmoor was no good at footer, no one cared to hear his opinion as to which side would win. He found himself ignored as a person of no account whatever, whereas all the Lower Fifth were ready to listen to anything Hugh Denston had to say. It was perfectly absurd to make such a fuss of a fellow simply because he had been shoved into one of the teams to fill the place of a man who had crocked up. The morbid craving for fame and homage had become a ruling passion with Ludmoor. He wished to be regarded as the leading spirit of the Form, and to feel himself being pushed into a back seat was more than he could endure. Consumed with a desire to assert himself, to do something which would impress the minds of all beholders with his dash and daring, he waited a chance to bounce into the limelight. He was like a ripe apple ready to fall when the bough is shaken, and, figuratively speaking, the shake was given by Steel and Fawcett. They were loitering in the Big School porch at the end of morning school, glancing at a

magazine which Steel had borrowed from a friend. The article which at the moment claimed their attention was a collection of what were stated to be true ghost tales.

"Some of them do make your hair stand on end," laughed Steel. "But these haunted houses always seem to be planted in some remote part of the country that no ordinary person is ever likely to visit."

"There is a place which is supposed to be haunted near here," replied Fawcett. "It's a wood—Birchwood, I believe it's called."

"That's right," said a voice. "It's a cover on the Webley Grange estate. You can see it from the train."

The information was given by Ludmoor, who had strolled out from the Big School in time to hear the conversation going on in the porch. Steel and Fawcett both belonged to the Lower Fifth, and were members of the Schoolhouse. Neither of them had any liking for Ludmoor, but his remark roused their curiosity.

"What d'you know about it?" challenged Steel.

"Well, it's been one of what you might call the local legends round here, and I've seen the place where it happened."

"What did happen?"

"A man was killed in a rather mysterious way."

"Tell us the story," said Fawcett.

"It was back in the middle of the last century, about the time of the Crimean War," began Ludmoor, always ready to talk if any one would listen. "An old man, called Squire Ryden, was then owner of the Grange, and he had an only son, Charles Ryden, who'd recently come of age. Charles went out one afternoon with his gun, and never came back. At first it was thought he might have gone to see a friend of his at a neighbouring



"He was found in Birchwood Cover."

house, and been persuaded to stay the night. Next day a search was made, and he was found in Birchwood Cover lying stone dead with his gun by his side."

"Shot himself?" queried Steel.

"No, it was never supposed he'd committed suicide. The general opinion was that he'd met with an accident—that he'd been holding the gun carelessly, and that a twig had caught the trigger. But there were some marks on the turf which made some folks think there must have been a struggle; that he'd been attacked by some one who had tried to wrench the gun out of his hands. Then, while they were wrestling, the gun went off and young Ryden got the charge in his breast. There's a stone to mark the place where he was found."

"A gravestone! D'you mean to say he's buried in the wood?"

"No fear. The old Squire nearly went off his head with grief; he did a lot of queer things, and one of them was to have this stone erected to mark the spot where his son died. It's a small granite obelisk about six feet high. There's a bronze plate fixed to one side of the base with the name—Charles Ryden, the date of his death, and a short inscription, though I forget how it runs. Above this is the Ryden coat-of-arms."

"How d'you know?"

"Because I've seen it. We went to a fête at the Grange two years ago, and my guv'nor took me into the cover to show me the stone. Made it an excuse to give me a lecture on the danger of handling firearms."

"Who lives there now?"

"Some retired Colonel and his wife—both old people. The Rydens came to an end when the Squire died, as Charles was his only child."

"Well, what about the ghost?" asked Fawcett. "Where and when is it supposed to appear?"

"Oh, it's to be seen almost any night, according to the yarn. A good many of the yokels believed that Charles Ryden had been murdered, and that was enough to start the story that the place was haunted. Some chap coming home from the pub may have looked over the hedge, and imagined he saw a white figure moving about among the trees. The ghost was said to come through the wood to a clearing where the obelisk stands, then it would throw up its arms and disappear into the ground."

"Gur-r-ruh!" shuddered Steel. "It sounds a bit creepy—the sort of story that would give you the shivers if you heard it just before you went to bed. Have you ever spoken to any one who claims to have seen it?"

"Most of the people who were alive at the time young

Ryden was killed are dead now, but I can tell you that there are still a lot of folks who wouldn't go into that wood after dark for any money."

"I suppose you are one of them."

"Me! I'm not afraid of ghosts."

"Don't suppose you have ever given yourself the chance of seeing one."

Ludmoor had got so much into the habit of boasting that his answer popped out of his mouth almost before he knew what he was saying.

"I have," he lied. "I've given myself the chance of seeing the ghost we've been talking about."

"When?"

"Why—er—when was it? Oh, I remember now. I went to Birchwood Cover one night in the summer holidays, and sat for an hour at the foot of that obelisk; but the only thing I saw was a rabbit."

"I don't believe it," snapped Steel. "You've just made that up."

"I like that," exclaimed Ludmoor, in an injured tone. "You beggars ask me to tell you about the ghost, and then call me a liar."

The two Schoolhouse boys were "fed-up" with Ludmoor's swank and brag; they thought it about time he was squashed.

"Don't lose your hair," laughed Steel. "My good man, no one believes half you say."

"Then why did you ask me to tell you the yarn?"

"Oh, I don't say the story itself wasn't correct, but you won't get me to believe you went and sat by that monument for an hour in the hope of seeing the ghost."

"No fear," murmured Fawcett.

"It's a fact," snorted Ludmoor. "I'm not afraid of the ghost—I don't believe in it, for that matter. It was

simply that some one dared me to do it, and I went to show I wasn't funky."

"You say you went in the summer holidays," began Fawcett. "It was daylight pretty well all night then. I'll bet you wouldn't go there after dark."

"I'll bet you I would."

"Well, go there again to-night."

"Will you come with me?"

"How do you suppose I'm to get out of the School-house after lock-up?"

"That's just like you blessed boarders," sneered Ludmoor. "You haven't got the pluck."

"Now look here, my friend, I'm going to make you an offer," said Steel. "If you'll go to that monument after dark and stay there ten minutes, I'll give you a sugar pig."

"What's the good when you fellows won't believe a word I say. If I told you I'd been to Birchwood you'd say it was a lie. You can't expect me to uproot the monument—bring a few tons of granite back in my pocket to prove I'm telling the truth."

"I'm not asking you to steal the monument. What I'm saying is, that I don't believe you've got the nerve to go to that clearing in the wood, and stay there for ten minutes."

"Yes, my boy," began Ludmoor, "it's all very well for you boarders to say you can't get out of the School-house after lock-up, but what about me? My guv'nor would kick up a most infernal row if he knew I'd come down after every one was in bed, and gone off roaming about the country in the middle of the night."

"Did you get into a row when, as you say you did, you went to the wood and stayed there a whole hour in the hope of seeing the ghost?" asked Fawcett.

"That was in the summer holidays, when I could do what I liked. Now, in term time, the guv'nor gets in a frantic rage if I'm not in bed by ten o'clock. It's just as big a risk for me to bunk off somewhere at midnight as it would be for you two fellows if you got out of the Schoolhouse."

"I always thought you were a chap who'd risk anything for a lark," began Steel. "Besides, I didn't say anything about 'midnight'; I said 'after dark.' Well, it's dark now by tea-time, and you could easily make an excuse that you wanted to go somewhere before you settled down to your home-work. If you scooted off on your bike I should say it ought not to take longer than half an hour."

"I'm not going to take all that fag for nothing. You fellows are just trying to pull my leg."

"We aren't asking you to do it for nothing. If you'll do it, I'm going to give you a sugar pig. It shall be presented to you in public—before the whole class. If you like, I'll hang it round your neck with a blue ribbon."

Ludmoor grinned; for a moment he pictured himself receiving this absurd trophy, and the idea rather took his fancy. The presentation would end in a rag, but he would figure as the daring fellow who was not afraid of a ghost. There was no necessity for him to go near the haunted cover. All he need do was come to Steel one morning, and say that he had done it. He might break off a twig from some bush in his own garden and declare it had come from Birchwood.

"I've a good mind to take it on," he growled. "Anyway, it'll make you look silly, my boy, when you have to hand me that medal."

"Very well; but you must tell me before you

leave school on the day you mean to go to this monument. And look here, half-holidays and Sundays are barred."

"Why?"

"Because you might go in the daylight, and you've got to do it after dark."

For a moment Ludmoor hesitated, wondering why the first of these conditions should be made. He had a vague suspicion that there must be a catch in it somewhere.

"I suppose you want to know the exact time I shall be there, so that you can come along dressed up in a white sheet, and try to give me a scare."

"Nonsense! I don't know where this cover is, or where the man was killed. It would take me all night to find the monument, let alone its being impossible for me to get away from the Schoolhouse after lock-up. No, I'll promise you this, that neither Fawcett nor I will say a word to any one till after it's over. I want to know when you are going, so that I can get that sugar pig. I shan't buy it on spec, with the chance of having it left on my hands."

"All right," said Ludmoor. "I'll make you fork out for calling me a funk. Yes, I'll let you know—if it's a fine night I may do it on Monday."

"Stout fellow!" cried Steel. "Fawcett, you've heard what he said, so I've got you for a witness. He's undertaken to go to that monument after dark, and he'll stand by it for ten minutes."

"I know what you'll do," sneered Ludmoor. "You'll try to get out of it by saying I didn't wait there for the full ten minutes, but I've got a watch with an illuminated dial. I shall take the time."

He swung out of the porch, and clattered down the

stone steps. Steel and Fawcett watched him as he strode away across the quad.

“D’you think he’ll go?” asked the latter.

“Not he,” laughed Steel. “But I’m sick of Ludmoor. I’ve been waiting for a chance to bowl him out, and now I’ll do it—middle stump.”

CHAPTER XVI

MARCHING ORDERS

"STAND still, and I'll scrape some of the mud off," laughed Joan.

"It wants a knife—something with a sharper edge than that club of yours," replied Martin.

The two cousins were walking up Falcon Road together, Joan on her way home from a hockey match at St. Catharine's, and Martin returning from the King's School playing-field. After a wet and stormy night the rain had ceased, and a steadily-rising barometer promised a change of weather which it might be hoped would last over Wednesday. With a cloudless sky overhead, the daylight seemed to be lingering longer than usual.

"I don't think you are as muddy as Hugh ; he was simply plastered," said Joan. "He was in such a state he wouldn't wait to walk home with me, but ran on to get changed."

"He's been making the most of his last practice before the match."

The pair halted outside the Denstons' gate.

"Do come in for a few minutes," pleaded Joan. "I want to talk to you, and it's too cold to stand about here. Well, if you won't come into the house, come round to the workshop. I'll get the key."

Two minutes later they entered the shed, and the girl tossed her hockey-club down on the table.

"The old log cabin looks just the same as usual," said Martin as he glanced round.

"It's never been the same since you gave up coming here," declared Joan. "What I want to ask is this—has Hugh spoken to you?"

"What about?"

"Oh, about this silly quarrel."

"I expect he's no thought for anything but the match just now," laughed Martin.

"I'm sure he wants to make friends again; I think he's jolly well ashamed of himself."

"Oh, I daresay it was partly my fault," said Martin good-naturedly. "I'm quite willing to bury the hatchet if——"

"If what?" asked Joan quickly.

The question which had risen in Martin's mind was whether a revival of his friendship with Hugh would mean being drawn into a sort of Triple Alliance, of which Ludmoor would be the third member. He himself had no intention of becoming a pal of Ludmoor's—Hugh would have to choose between them.

"If what?" the girl repeated.

"If he's willing to forget all about this row, and let us carry on together same as we've always done in the past."

"I'm sure he's willing," said Joan eagerly. "You two must make it up before the end of the term—you simply must; then we shall have lots of fun together in the holidays."

"We'll make Hugh a member of our 'Hearts of Oak Society,' eh?"

"We'll make him a 'Vice-President' if you like. By the way, I'm going to have tea with Mrs. Craddock on Tuesday. The fun is that she thought you were my

brother, and mother had to explain that you're a cousin."

"So long as she's forgiven us for coming to take away her chesterfield, it's all right," chuckled Martin. "If she thought she saw a likeness between you and me, I must be better looking than I ever imagined."

Joan laughed, and, thrusting her hand into her coat pocket, drew out a little packet wrapped up in soft paper.

"There," she said, "I'll show you what I got on my way home. Now, do you see what it is? green-and-white ribbons. Day-boy colours. I'm going to make it into a big rosette to wear on Wednesday. I shall ask Mrs. Craddock if she'll come to the match. I do hope that Hugh will do well."

"Oh, he always plays a good game when he sets his mind to it. You must make him take care of himself between now and Wednesday. Don't let him do anything silly like catching cold, or falling off his bike and putting his wrist or ankle out of joint."

"He'll take care of himself. He'd be a fool if he didn't. What would Winter think of him if he crocked up at the last minute? Martin, are the Day-boys going to win?"

"Hope so; you may depend they'll do their best. But it won't be a walk-over; the Schoolhouse have a jolly good team."

Joan thought for a few moments, then a bright idea flashed into her mind.

"If the Day-boys win it'll be a good opportunity for you and Hugh to shake hands after the game is over. Yes, that's what you must do; then we'll come home and have tea together."

"Right," agreed Martin. "But what if the School-

house carry off the cup? Then I suppose we shall all sneak home with our tails between our legs."

"The Day-boys must and shall win, and we'll all come home rejoicing."

Martin strolled towards the carpenter's bench, picked up a chisel, tried the edge, then laid it down again.

"It seems like home being back in this old shanty," he murmured.

"Well, you'll be able to come here as often as you like in the holidays. I shall be jolly glad of your company. I mean to do some chip carving, and I don't like being here alone."

"Why not?"

"I suppose it's silly of me," began Joan. "But one night I thought I saw a face looking in at me through the window. Of course it was only the reflection of my own face with the light from the lamp shining on it."

"I don't see why you should be frightened at your face, even if Mrs. Craddock does think you are like me," chuckled Martin. "I don't claim to be handsome, but I shouldn't expect a horse, if it saw my face, to take fright and jump over a hedge."

"I wasn't frightened at the time, but I had a bad dream the night after it happened, and since then I've had a sort of fancy in my mind that, if I were in this place alone, I might look up and see some horrible face glaring at me through the window. Don't give me away—I mean don't chaff me about it before your folks or mine. I haven't said a word about it to any one but you."

"You may be sure I won't tell any one. You and Hugh suffer from the same complaint—too strong imagination. That's why he thought he saw some one in

the garden next door, the night we went there to get my aeroplane."

"Hugh's convinced it was a real person, so don't say anything about it when he speaks to you. Let him think what he likes."

Martin nodded.

"And remember," continued Joan, "if not before, peace will be made on Wednesday, after the match; the Day-boys will win, Hugh will have greatly distinguished himself, and we shall all return home in triumph and have a simply glorious tea together. I think that's all I wanted to say, so don't forget."

Joan picked up her hockey-stick, then glanced at the window as if to make sure there was no one outside.

"I wonder if it was a real person crouching by that arch, or if it was only Hugh's fancy."

"You've just told me I wasn't to talk about it," laughed Martin. "You'd better mind what you're about, or you and I shall quarrel."

"No, we shan't—never, I hope. But I do wonder sometimes if Hugh really did see any one in that garden. I can't see any reason for a man to have gone there at that time of day; there was no fruit for him to steal."

"It's a mystery," said Martin solemnly, though with a twinkle in his eye. "It's one of those things you can't explain, so don't worry about it any more."

In his own home, a mile away, Ludmoor was pondering over another problem. Steel had passed him as they left the playing-field, and had called back over his shoulder, "Remember, it's not to be done on a Saturday or Sunday." It sounded rather like a taunt; as if Steel felt so sure of scoring in the end, that he was determined to keep the game alive.

"Those two chaps have got a down on me for some reason or other, and they want to make me look a fool," muttered Ludmoor, as he struggled out of his jersey.

But it seemed plain sailing as far as he himself was concerned. All that he had to do was to declare he had been to Birchwood, and remained by the monument for ten minutes by his watch. Steel and Fawcett would have to take his word, for it would be impossible for them to prove that what he said was not the truth.

"I wonder if they mean to tell some one who doesn't belong to the Schoolhouse, some town chap, and tip him a bob to hide in that wood about the time I'm due there, and act the ghost? They think I should never stay there ten minutes if I saw a white figure gliding about among the trees."

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. A promise had been given that no one should be told of the errand till after it had been performed. Ludmoor was always ready to lie when it served his purpose, but he felt pretty sure that Steel and Fawcett would keep their word. No, it was simply a game of bluff, and these fellows were banking on a belief that he would not accept their challenge.

"I wish I'd never said anything about the ghost," fretted Ludmoor. "Of course I can tell them I've been, and claim the sugar pig. I'd like to trump their trick, but the best thing will be to let the whole thing slide. If I keep out of their way they'll have forgotten all about it in a few days' time."

Ludmoor ate his tea in an easier frame of mind, and during Sunday he hardly gave the matter a thought; but on Monday he was destined to find that this silly

business could not be shelved as easily as he had imagined. When he reached the King's School one of the first persons he encountered was Steel.

"Hullo, sportsman," was the latter's greeting. "Is it coming off to-night?"

"No, it isn't."

"I thought you said you'd go to the wood on Monday night, if the weather was fine. Well, it doesn't look as if we were going to have any rain."

"I tell you I can't go to-night," snapped Ludmoor. "Dolphin always gives us oceans of prep work on Monday. Besides, my gov'nor wants me to do something for him as soon as I get home, and that'll take at least half an hour."

"Hard luck," returned Steel. "Still, you can't expect me to keep that offer of a presentation pig standing open for ever. It'll be withdrawn at the end of the week, so Friday night will be your last chance of winning the trophy."

"Oh, don't talk rot," replied Ludmoor angrily, and walked off in a huff.

This leg-pulling was beginning to get on his nerves, but on Tuesday there seemed every chance that he would be given a respite; all the fellows were talking about the match. On arriving in the quad he joined a group of class-mates, but it was not long before he had his corns trodden on badly. The question which the party were discussing was about rugby football, the risk of a player attempting to pass the ball when in his own twenty-five. Reeves thought it should never be done; Maple and Hampson held that there were times when the old edict, "Don't pass in your own twenty-five," might be disregarded.

"It's what I call a silly old rule of thumb," began

Ludmoor in a tone of authority. "If, for instance, I had the ball, and——"

"Oh, shut up," interrupted Reeves; "what do you know about footer? Run away and play marbles."

It proved a distressful morning, since Mr. Dolphin was in an exacting frame of mind. He was not going to allow work to be neglected because of an inter-house final, and he came down heavily on those unfortunate ones who failed to give him satisfaction. Every one, from Fox downwards, was glad when the bell rang for break.

"What about to-night for that little jaunt of yours?" inquired Steel, who chanced to rub shoulders with Ludmoor as they were passing out of the classroom.

"Oh, don't keep on asking that silly question," was the reply. "Why can't you give that joke of yours a rest, at any rate till after the match? You School-house blighters want a jolly good licking, and we'll give you one to-morrow."

"'We,'" laughed Steel; "I'm rather amused to hear you say *we*. It sounds almost as if you yourself were going to help in giving us this frightful thrashing."

Ludmoor quickened his pace, strode along the corridor, and out into the quad. He wandered about aimlessly for a few minutes, then noticed a small group of boys standing in the Big School porch. He drifted towards them, mounted the stone steps, and the next moment discovered that they were studying a half-sheet of paper which Winter had just pinned up on the big notice-board. It was the official list of the Day-boys team which was to play on the morrow in the final round for the footer cup. The new-comer ran his eyes down the column of names, and read one at the bottom which seemed to stand out as if printed in capitals: DENSTON, H.

"Now he'll think himself famous," muttered Ludmoor below his breath, and turned away from the board.

He had come out of class smarting from the lash of Mr. Dolphin's tongue; then Steel had irritated him with that stupid question; now as a last straw came a mental vision of Hugh Denston being lionized by the Lower Fifth, while he himself was treated as a useless nobody. Not more than two hours ago he had been told to hold his tongue—to "run away and play marbles."

"I'd like to show 'em," he growled as he jogged down the steps. "I'd like to show 'em who's the best man when it comes to anything that wants a bit of nerve. Any ass can shove in a scrum, and afterwards make out it was mainly his play won the game."

He strode on across the gravel with a scowl on his face, and had not gone far when he was passed by Steel and Fawcett, who were wandering about arm in arm. They both smiled as they caught sight of him, and Steel gave his companion a dig in the ribs. It was more than Ludmoor could stand; he swung round, determined not to endure this torment any longer.

"Hi!" he called; then lowering his voice as the pair came towards him: "You two chaps think I'm funky to go to Birchwood. Well, I'm not. I'll go to-night."

"Good man," laughed Steel. "I'll dash into town after school, and get the sugar pig."

"Yes, I suppose you've got pluck enough to go to a cookshop," sneered Ludmoor, tingling with rage. "But, look here, don't you and Fawcett start blabbing about it in class or at the Schoolhouse; if you do you'll get me into a beastly row. Remember the understanding was you wouldn't tell a soul till after the thing was done."

"We won't tell any one," promised Steel. "Not

till you are presented with the trophy. There's one thing you must do, and I'll explain what it is this afternoon. Get back as soon as you can from dinner, and you'll find me waiting for you over there by the gym."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"Couldn't possibly, as I haven't got the speech ready. Do as I say; be here at a quarter to two, and that will leave plenty of time for me to give you your marching orders."

"Orders!" echoed Ludmoor, raising his eyebrows. "I'm not going to take orders from anybody. I suppose you mean to give me a sort of chart with the course I'm to follow, and send me miles out of my way so that it'll be impossible for me to do it in the time. I'm not going to stay out all night."

"You won't have to, and you can steer any course you like," said Steel soothingly. "But I want to see you again, all the same, so don't forget—a quarter to two, outside the gym."

Ludmoor gave no definite promise, but during the last hour of morning school it struck him that this was Steel's and Fawcett's last effort. They knew that they were beaten, but would not own it. There was nothing of any importance that either of them could have to say to him, but they hoped that he would not turn up at the appointed time, in which case they would say that he had not complied with the conditions they had laid down for the enterprise, and the whole thing was "off." Very well, he'd show them that they couldn't score off him with a mean little trick of that kind.

"No fear," thought Ludmoor; "I'll keep them to it—see if I don't."

He ran all the way home, gobbled down his dinner, and returned to the school on his bicycle. At the first

glance as he entered the quad he thought it was deserted ; then he caught sight of Steel standing by the gym. He had something in his hand which from a distance looked like a rolled-up sheet of foolscap paper.

" I've got the sugar pig," began Steel. " Went out and bought it before dinner. Like to see it ? "

" No," snapped Ludmoor. " What is it you want to tell me ? "

" Come in here, then we shan't be interrupted," said Steel.

He led the way into the gym, Ludmoor following, and clenching his fists as the thought occurred to him that he was being drawn into some form of ambushade. But no, the gym was silent and deserted. Steel closed the door.

" Are you going to-night ? " he asked.

" Of course I am."

" Then to-morrow morning you'll be presented with the trophy, and the day-boys will be bucked because it'll show they are good for something even if they can't win the cup. Did you ever hear of Cook, the fellow who claimed that he'd discovered the North Pole, and afterwards it was discovered that he'd never been near it ? "

" What's the good of talking about the North Pole ? " cried Ludmoor impatiently.

" When you are honoured with that presentation to-morrow some fellows may be jealous, and try to make out you're no better than Dr. Cook. They may say you've never been near the haunted wood. See what I mean ? "

Ludmoor saw quite clearly, since he never meant to go to Birchwood. It rather took his breath away to have his private schemes laid bare in this manner, but he



"Suppose this is the base of the obelisk."

made a pretence of being indignant at the thought of such a thing.

"I suppose that's what you and Fawcett mean to say," he sneered. "If so, you might as well call me a liar at once, and have done with it. I'm not going to that wood simply to have you fellows declare that it's another of my yarns, and that's what you mean to do."

"Not a bit, but you'll have to prove it—only fair to yourself you should. You must bring back something that will prove that you really have been to Birchwood."

"I've told you once before, that I can't bring the bally monument back in my pocket."

"No, you can't steal the monument, but you can bring back a rubbing of the inscription on the bronze plate. Here's what you want—two sheets of tracing-paper in case one of them gets torn, and this is a piece of what the shoemakers call heel-ball. You can't make a rubbing with a lead pencil, but you can do it easily with a lump of heel-ball."

"I've never made a rubbing of anything in my life," objected Ludmoor. "How d'you suppose I'm going to do it in the dark?"

"It's quite easy," said Steel, unrolling the tracing-paper and stepping to the nearest wall. "There, suppose this is the base of the obelisk, and here's the bronze plate. All you have to do is to hold the paper with your left hand—like so, then you'll have your right hand to use the heel-ball. My dear chap, any kid could do it."

Ludmoor's face twitched with rage; but for the fact that he knew he would be out-matched in a rough-and-tumble, he would have fallen upon Steel and banged his head against the wall. So this was the little trap which had been laid for him!

"You and Fawcett are mighty smart," he snarled. "I should think that when you leave school you'll both set up as private detectives. Why couldn't you have told me this morning?"

"You might have hiked off to the wood in the dinner-hour—or that's what fellows might say you did. Now I shall be able to bear witness that you couldn't possibly have gone till after dark. Tell us if you see the ghost."

"Idiot!" snorted Ludmoor. "You and Fawcett have got a spite against me for some reason or other.

You are the sort of blighters who like to push other people into doing things you daren't do yourselves. All this little scheme of yours is to make me look a fool."

"You won't look a fool, you'll be and look a hero—the man who thinks no more of walking through a haunted cover than he would of strolling down his own back garden. I don't see there's any reason why you should get ratty."

There was a pause.

"Of course if you've changed your mind and don't mean to go, there's an end of it," chuckled Steel. "In that case I'll put the sugar pig up to auction. I shall say that it was intended as a trophy——"

"Give it here," interrupted Ludmoor savagely.

He snatched the tracing-paper and heel-ball out of Steel's hand and strode out of the gym. Steel waited a moment, then ran back to the Schoolhouse to stow the sugar pig away in his locker. As he fished out his bunch of keys he was joined by his chum.

"Well, has he thrown up the sponge?" inquired Fawcett.

"Not yet; it staggered him when I told him what he'd got to do. But he's taken the tracing-paper—means to try to bluff us to the very last."

"I don't suppose for a minute he'll go near that wood."

"Of course he won't; but we've got him this time," laughed Steel. "I'm only wondering what excuse he'll try to make in the morning. Perhaps he'll sham sick, and stay in bed."

CHAPTER XVII

WALLS HAVE EARS

ON leaving the gym Ludmoor headed for the cloak-room, his one wish being to escape from Steel. He folded the tracing-paper into a wad, then thrust it and the heel-ball into an inside pocket of his overcoat.

"Mean, dirty trick ; just what you might expect from cads like Steel and Fawcett," he muttered. "But I'll—I'll——"

He found himself unable to finish the sentence. Even now, with the tracing-paper in his pocket, he had no intention of going to Birchwood ; but he would not own himself beaten. Would it be possible to forge a rubbing of the bronze plate ; to outline figures and letters very faintly in pencil, then work round them with the heel-ball sharpened to a point ? It would be difficult ; and, though he had seen the obelisk, he had forgotten how the inscription was worded. He was not certain of the date.

He was racking his brain to remember whether the tragedy had occurred in October or November when he entered the cloakroom ; then, as he pulled off his overcoat and prepared to hang it on the nearest peg, a fresh idea flashed into his mind. Why not blacken the tracing-paper with the heel-ball, then tear it in places, and hold it under a tap ? He could say that the monument had been so wet that the sheet of thin paper

had nearly gone to pulp under his hand. This mass of dirty fragments was the nearest thing to a rubbing it had been possible for him to obtain. A kid in the Lower School might swallow this explanation, but it was not likely that Steel or Fawcett would be satisfied.

"The beggars have set themselves to catch me out; that's what they mean to do, if I give them the chance."

The advance-guard of returning day-boys was entering the gates, and Ludmoor, being in no mood to speak to any of them, drifted into the reading-room. Seating himself he picked up a magazine, and made a pretence of studying its pages. He was thinking hard all the time, and now came a notion which seemed to offer a way of escape.

After dismissal, why should he not hurry off to his father's factory, and get hold of Cole? For a shilling Cole would be ready enough to hike off to Birchwood, make the rubbing, and bring it to a place agreed upon for a secret meeting. For a few moments Ludmoor toyed with this idea, then the whole scheme collapsed like a house of cards.

"What a fool I am," he growled inwardly. "Cole's ill—laid up with a bad attack of bronchitis. The gov'nor was speaking about it at breakfast this morning."

He was as much at sea as ever when the bell rang for afternoon school. Ludmoor had been long enough in the Lower Fifth to feel at home there, yet, as he took his seat in Mr. Dolphin's classroom, he fancied that the faces round him had all become unfriendly. He was beginning at last to realize that he was not popular, but he was too bone-headed to see that it was his own fault.

"It's Steel's doing," he told himself. "He's been telling every one about his artful little scheme, and

to-morrow he'll set the whole lot of 'em on me like a pack of wolves."

The exercise which he had to write was fairly easy, and he drove away with his pen, pausing at the end of each sentence to wonder how he could escape the snare into which he was being driven. The only way to defeat Steel and Fawcett would be to perform the feat they had dared him to attempt, and suddenly he asked himself—"Why shouldn't I do it?" It was quite easy; there would be no difficulty in making some excuse for slipping out of the house after tea, he knew a short cut to Birchwood, and, if he ran there and back, he would be home again in less than an hour with the rubbing of the bronze plate safe in his pocket.

"Fools those two will look when they find they haven't got me after all," he thought. "I'll make 'em hand over that sugar pig. If it's broken, they'll have to get another."

Ludmoor's lips widened in a grin as he pictured the presentation. The mock ceremony would be treated as a joke, but it would give him an innings. On being handed the trophy he would no doubt be called upon for a speech. He would laughingly declare that what he had done was nothing to make a song about, but he would make it appear a test of daring all the same.

"I might tell 'em I saw something I thought was the ghost."

He could describe how he had crept through the wood, reached the haunted glade, wiped the moisture from the bronze plate, and begun to take the rubbing. Then out of the corner of his eye he had glimpsed what looked like a white figure moving slowly towards the obelisk. For a moment he had felt a bit queer, but he had clenched his teeth, finished his task, and then boldly

advanced towards the "ghost." Instead of a phantom it had turned out to be—oh, anything, a stray cow, or some trick of the moonlight shining on the trunk of a silver birch.

The look of satisfaction faded from Ludmoor's face. His own mental picture had jarred his nerves. The wood after dark would be a dreary sort of place in which to walk alone—and some people really believed the ghost tale was true. That was all nonsense—but it would be much easier to take the rubbing if he had a companion to give a helping hand.

"I can't do it by myself. It wants another chap to hold a flash-lamp, and keep one side of the tracing-paper steady while I scrub away with the heel-ball."

The understanding was that he should go alone, so his accomplice must be a person who would be willing to hold his tongue, and not claim any share in the exploit. Who could he get? Was there any one he could trust?

A note scribbled on a scrap of waste paper was passed from desk to desk until it reached Hugh Denston. He opened it, and read the pencilled scrawl :

"Don't run off after dismissal till you've seen me. I've got something to tell you. Most important.

"L. V. L."

The passing of notes in class was forbidden, yet about the time Ludmoor broke this rule the same offence was committed in the Lower Fourth. Geach was the recipient of a message which ran as follows :

"All right, young Screech, we'll teach you to throw your weight about."

To an outsider the note would have seemed senseless, since it is impossible for a person to "throw about" a thing which he does not possess. Geach was as light as a feather, his bony frame being in keeping with his ferret face, therefore why should any one refer to his "weight"? But Geach understood, and his heart was troubled. He had no love for rugger, his opinion of the game being that it gave hostile players an opportunity to bowl him over, heap themselves upon him, and drive all the breath out of his body. But during the last few days even Geach had become infected with what might be called the footer-cup fever, and his shrill assertions that the Day-boys would win had brought him into collision with three of his class-mates—Coleman and Kelly of the Schoolhouse, and Jenkin Two, who belonged to Pratt's.

The passage-of-arms had taken place in the quad before the commencement of afternoon school. Geach had led off with the assertion that Malcolm, the Schoolhouse scrum half, was not quick enough in picking up the ball, and never knew what to do with it when he had obtained possession. Coleman had declared that the speaker did not know what he was talking about; Kelly and Jenkin were of the same opinion, and from a debate on the art of rugby football the meeting had descended to an exchange of personal insults. Geach had called Coleman a "blithering ape," and in return had been told that he was a "rat," a "little measle," and a "gas-escape." There had been a brief struggle, from which the day-boy, outnumbered by three to one, had executed a masterly retreat. Pebbles had been hurled after him, and Coleman had been pounced down upon by a zealous prefect, and given an imposition for throwing stones in the quad, a practice strictly forbidden.

Geach tore up the note with a grin intended to show his enemies that he treated their threat with contempt ; but he knew they meant business, and, being an old campaigner, he guessed how they meant to act. After dismissal they would lie in wait for him near the gate, and cut him out from the herd of departing day-boys.

" You won't catch me," thought Geach. " I'll dodge you, see if I don't."

Events turned out exactly as he had foreseen ; no attempt was made to grab him as the class passed to the close of work assembly, nor was he pounced upon as the Lower Fourth trooped out of the Big School, though, by the sound of their voices, he knew that Coleman, Kelly, and Jenkin were close at his heels. Geach tripped lightly down the stone steps, then with a quick turn he darted to the cloakroom and flung on his overcoat. In the semi-darkness of the early twilight, and keeping in the dense shadow of the building, he ran back past the Big School, and dived into the crypt. Here he intended to remain until his foes abandoned their ambushade. They would soon grow tired of waiting, and think he had managed to slip past them in the crowd.

As usual, a single gas-jet was burning in the crypt, and by its light three day-boys who had cycled to school steered their machines out through the narrow door. The great vault was too cold for loitering about, and, left to his own devices, Geach performed a clog-dance to keep himself warm. Pausing for breath, he noticed that a solitary bicycle stood propped against the wall, as yet unclaimed. He stepped towards it, spun one of the pedals, then found a card fastened to the tool-bag which gave the owner's name.

" Ludmoor ! " snorted Geach.

The name itself was enough to rouse his wrath, and the

recollection that it was here, in this crypt, that his camera had been broken, brought the whole thing back to his mind as if it had happened half an hour ago. Perkin had since paid for the damage, but that had not in any way changed Geach's feelings towards the real offender. It had been Ludmoor's fault; he had told a downright lie, and followed it up with threats and abuse.

"Good mind I'd smash his bike," muttered Geach vindictively. "I'd like to stick a knife into the tyres. If I could find a blooming sledge-hammer I'd simply——"

The youngster's jaw dropped, and he turned his head towards the door. Voices—some one *was* coming—it might be a search party headed by Coleman. Geach fled along the cement floor, then dodged into hiding behind one of the stone pillars. He had scarcely done so when Ludmoor and Hugh Denston entered the crypt. They were continuing a conversation which must have started some minutes before they came within earshot of the fugitive.

"The story is that the place is haunted, but that's all rot," Ludmoor was saying. "Anyway, I'm going there to-night—to Birchwood. I know a short cut; I've been there before."

"Why must you go to-night?" growled Hugh.

"I've told you a dozen times, I've got to show them the proof to-morrow morning."

The last part of this reply puzzled Geach. He knew all about the haunted cover, and why any one should choose to go there at night seemed to him amazing.

"It'll be a treat to see their faces," went on Ludmoor. "Silly fools they'll both look. Of course I'm depending on you to keep your mouth shut. Don't let them know that you went with me."

There was a silence broken by the striking of a match,



"I'm not going," said Hugh.

which told that the owner of the bicycle was about to light his lamp.

"I'm not going," said Hugh.

"Well, I think that's jolly mean," protested Ludmoor. "Only the other day I saved you from losing thirty bob, and the first thing I ask you to do for me, you won't take the fag."

"I don't see there's any need for me to go."

"I've explained it all, only you won't listen. When we get to the obelisk I want you to help me to get the rubbing of the bronze plate. Why not? I suppose you aren't afraid of the ghost?"

"Of course I'm not," cried Hugh angrily, as if he had been slashed with a whip. "Very well, I'll go with you. But, look here, Ludmoor; this is the last time——"

The sentence died away as the speaker followed his companion out of the crypt. Geach stepped from his hiding-place, blinking his eyes in the gas-light. He dearly loved to pry into other people's secrets, and this one seemed nuts for him to crack.

"What a mad thing to do," he muttered. "I should think those two fellows must be off their rockers. They'd get into a jolly old row if they were collared fooling about in that wood.

"Why should he want to take the bronze plate off the stone? He's never happy unless he's smashing other people's things—like he did my camera. If he carries that plate away with him it'll be robbery—he might get sent to jail. Denston must be a fool—I suppose he's going to lend Ludmoor some tools. They couldn't shift that plate with their fingers."

Determined to escape being captured by Coleman and company, Geach waited another five minutes, and when he stole out of his refuge there was no sight nor sound of the enemy. He started on his homeward journey at a brisk trot, but twenty yards from the school gates he slackened speed. He was just about to pass Hooper's, a small confectioner's shop which did a good trade with the King's School boys, who went there during "break" to refresh themselves with ices and lemonade in summer, or buns and hot coffee in the colder weather. In the doorway a boy was standing, and the light from the shop showed that

he was wearing the school cap. For a moment Geach feared that he was Coleman; then the face came into clearer view, and proved to be that of Martin Grane.

"Good-night," he was saying; "I'll come round and see Joe himself if there's anything else I want to know."

The speaker stepped backwards on the narrow pavement, and bumped against Geach.

"Hullo," said the small boy pertly, "I should think you'd spoil your tea if you go in there eating buns at this time of night."

"Oh, I've not been having a feed," laughed Martin. "I'm thinking of trying to rig up a wireless in the holidays, and Hooper promised to show me a set he's got in his back parlour. It's a small one that Joe has been making in his spare time."

"Who's Joe?"

"Why, Hooper's son. He's not come home from the factory yet. He works for Ludmoor."

Once more that hated name set Geach's teeth on edge.

"I could tell you something about Ludmoor—young Ludmoor, I mean," he growled. "He's a mean blighter, and he'll get himself into a jolly old row if he doesn't mind what he's about."

"What's he up to now?"

"You know the yarn about Birchwood—that cover near Webley Grange? It's said to be haunted, and Ludmoor's going there to-night to play the fool. Some one must have dared him to go there and wrench the bronze plate off the obelisk which marks the spot where old Squire Ryden's son was killed. That's what Ludmoor means to do, and he's got your cousin, Hugh Denston, to promise to go with him."

"Nonsense! Who told you that silly yarn?"

"It's quite true; I heard them talking about it."

“ When ? ”

Geach gave a hurried account of his recent experience in the crypt, but his mistake as to what Ludmoor meant to do when he got to Birchwood made the story sound incredible.

“ Oh, that’s all rubbish ! ” scoffed Martin. “ No fellow in his senses would do such a dastardly thing as to wrench the bronze plate off that obelisk. It would be no good to any one, and the person who stole it would get the police on his track. You may be jolly sure that Denston would never do such a thing.”

“ Ludmoor chipped him about being afraid of the ghost, and that’s why Denston said he’d go—just to show he wasn’t funky. I suppose he’ll supply the tools they’ll want. Don’t tell either of them I’ve told you, or they’d give me beans. Ludmoor’s a beastly cad—he threatened to give me a licking because I called him a liar.”

The pair had reached a point where their way divided, and paused to wish each other good-night.

“ Look here, young fellow-my-lad,” began Martin. “ Don’t you go spreading this wild yarn of yours all about the school. We don’t want another row like there was after that train had been stopped on the railway, and that’s about what will happen if it gets to Alwing’s ears that some of the day-boys have been hiking off to Birchwood to tear the plate from the monument. It’s absurd, but he might think there was some truth in the story, so keep your mouth shut.”

CHAPTER XVIII

DAY-BOY COLOURS

GEACH was gone almost before the warning that he should keep his mouth shut was spoken. He fancied he heard voices in the direction of the school gateway, and, as there was a chance that the Coleman gang might still be on the warpath, he ran off down the street and was soon out of sight.

"What a little spitfire he is," chuckled Martin. "I wonder if that yarn is his own invention, or if some one has been pulling his leg."

This might have been done by Ludmoor himself. Possibly he had seen the small boy hiding in the crypt, and had told this absurd story in the hope that Geach would repeat it as an actual fact. On the morrow, if Geach went about telling people that the Birchwood monument had been defaced, when no such thing had really happened, it would give Ludmoor a good excuse for boxing the scandalmonger's ears. For a few moments Martin wondered if the whole thing was a hoax, then his thoughts returned to "wireless." He was inclined to take the small receiving-set he had just seen as a pattern for the one he himself intended to make. He could go to young Hooper for advice if he found himself in any difficulty. Joe would be able to tell him what the whole thing had cost, and where he got the pole for his aerial. With his mind intent on this holiday scheme

he trudged along; then, as he turned into the Falcon Road, he recognized a familiar figure as it came tripping towards him in the light of a street lamp.

"Hullo!" chirped Joan. "You're late; been kept in?"

"No," laughed Martin. "Where are you off to at this time o' day?"

"I'm going to have tea with Mrs. Craddock. I wish you were coming too, but I believe she means to ask us all to go there some evening in the holidays."

"Then mind you behave nicely, or she may change her mind. Don't get jam on your fingers, and then wipe them on the tablecloth."

"I've got better manners than either of you boys," declared Joan. "By the way, are your folks going to the Town Hall to-night?"

"What for?"

"Why, you must have seen the bills! Mr. Halifax, the explorer, is lecturing on his travels in Central America. They say he's a splendid speaker, and the story of his adventures and discoveries is thrilling. Father and mother are both going."

"Stupid of me, I forgot for the moment that the lecture was at the Town Hall. Yes, my folks are going, and so is a friend of theirs—man called Talbot who lives at Hayley Cross. He's going to leave his car at one of the garages in town, then come on and have tea with us. I say, it seems to me *you* ought to attend this lecture."

"Why?"

"You might get hold of Halifax, and persuade him to join the 'Hearts of Oak' Society. The next time he goes on one of his journeys he might take some of our acorns with him, and plant them in all kinds of strange places."

"I'm afraid our scheme doesn't seem to be making much headway," laughed Joan. "Tell you what we'll do—we'll plant an acorn to commemorate the Day-boys winning the cup to-morrow. Hugh ought to stick it in the ground, and we must present him with a silver trowel."

"You'd better not worry him about the match or it'll make him nervous. He's got back from school, I suppose?"

"Yes, he came in while I was putting on my things. He seemed a bit ratty."

"Don't tell me he's caught cold."

"No, it was only as if something had vexed him. I thought perhaps he'd had a row with Mr. Dolphin during afternoon school. Well, I must trot on down to Chestnut Avenue."

Joan turned, and as she did so something caught Martin's eye.

"Is that supposed to be an artificial flower that you've got stuck on your coat?" he asked.

"You must be colour-blind," was the reply. "I suppose you can't see it clearly in this dim light. Green and white—Day-boy colours; it's my rosette. I'm going to show it to Mrs. Craddock."

"You might make one for me."

"H'm, perhaps I will and perhaps I won't. You should have asked me sooner—I've used up all the ribbon. Now I must scoot along, or I shall be late. Good-night—see you again to-morrow afternoon."

Martin walked on smiling; he was amused at Joan's enthusiasm. She seemed to count herself a sort of honorary member of the Day-boys' House at the King's School. Reaching home he found the expected visitor seated at the tea-table. Mr. Talbot was an old friend

and a distant relative of the Granes. Martin paid little attention to the conversation between his elders, which for a time took the form of an exchange of memories of people who belonged to a past generation. It was not until the meal was nearly ended that a question asked by his father turned his thoughts from the respective merits of indoor and outdoor aerials.

"I suppose you didn't meet the ghost?"

"Where?" inquired Mr. Talbot, smiling.

"On that dark piece of road just this side the old toll-gate. That's said to be the scene of its manifestations, though, I fancy, its next appearance will be in the police court."

"Ah! now I know what you mean," replied Mr. Talbot. "I heard something about it at Hayley. No, I didn't see the ghost—I should say it wants to be 'laid' with a horse-whip."

"What is this ghost story?" inquired Mrs. Grane.

"I thought I'd told you, Margaret. It's just a game that some young scoundrel has been playing. He's done it two nights in succession, jumping out of a hedge with a white sheet over him that's been smeared with phosphorus or luminous paint. Two poor girls who work for Mear, the draper, have to ride back to Hayley every night, and they've been scared nearly out of their wits. One of them fell off her bicycle, and might have been badly hurt."

"What a shame! Can't anything be done to protect them?"

"If his ghostship appears again to-night I expect he'll be marched off to the police station," replied Mr. Grane, with a grim smile. "Mear told me, on the quiet, that a brother of one of the girls and some other young fellows are going to lay a trap this evening; they mean to watch

out, and, if this rascal tries the same trick on again, they'll probably deal with him in a way he won't relish."

Martin paused in the act of raising his cup to his lips. Suddenly he fancied he saw the meaning of the wild tale told to him by the youthful Geach. Of course "the dark piece of road just this side of the old toll-gate" was where the highway passed between Birchwood and another cover. Ludmoor must have heard of the ghost hunt, and been boasting to Hugh that he meant to join in the chase.

"It's just the sort of thing he'd like to brag about," thought Martin. "He'll swear he was made leader of the posse, and that he was the only one among them who wasn't in a blue funk."

When tea was finished, Mr. and Mrs. Grane conducted their visitor into the drawing-room. The table was cleared, and Martin settled down to his home-work. For a quarter of an hour he remained busy with his books; then he rose, intending to move his chair a bit nearer the fire. As he did so, he noticed a little packet wrapped up in white paper lying on the mantelpiece. He picked it up, and saw that it bore his own name inscribed in a school-girl's handwriting.

"Something from Joan," he murmured, smiling. "She must have called round, and left it after she got back from school. Mother forgot to give it to me."

He unwrapped the packet, and found that it contained a green-and-white rosette, a counterpart of the one which the girl had herself been wearing.

"She told me she'd used up all the ribbon," chuckled Martin. "She'll be in a great state of excitement to-morrow afternoon. It's to be hoped that we win, and that Hugh does something wonderful."

There was not much chance that Hugh would out-shine such veterans as Winter and Cardwell, but it was

certainly to be hoped that he would not distinguish himself by some glaring mistake in his play due to an attack of "stage fright." In that case he would be vexed and humiliated when he came off the ground, and in no mood for peace-making. It would be a sad disappointment for Joan ; enough to cast a gloom over the commencement of the Christmas holidays.

"He may be a bit nervous before the game begins, but he'll do all right once they've made a start," thought Martin.

He laid the rosette down on the mantelshelf, and, as he did so, his mind turned to another subject. Ludmoor must be a priceless ass if he meant to hike off to Birchwood. He would probably be set upon by the ghost-hunters, who would resent his "butting in," and interfering with their plans. Hugh would never be such a fool as to go out asking for trouble on the eve of the great match. What if he got hurt, and lost his chance of playing in the Day-boys team? Of course he would never risk doing anything so utterly foolish.

"Ludmoor chipped him about being afraid of the ghost, and that's why Denston said he'd go—just to show he wasn't funky."

Martin almost fancied he could hear Geach's squeaky voice, and, as the words which the small boy had spoken came back to his mind, he remembered what had been the cause of the quarrel between himself and his cousin. Hugh had been enraged by the suggestion that he had shown the white feather, and a taunt of a similar kind might have goaded him to accept Ludmoor's challenge.

"It's his weak point. He'd do any silly thing to escape being called a coward."

Martin stepped back to his chair, but he was no longer in a mood to continue his home-work. He was disturbed



"Mother, I'm just going down the road."

with an instinctive feeling that there was serious trouble brewing. He glanced at the clock, and saw that the time was between five and ten minutes to seven. Suddenly he was seized with a strong desire to see Hugh, and learn if there was any truth in Geach's story. He might be snubbed and told to mind his own business, but for Joan's sake he must put his pride in his pocket.

Martin sprang to his feet, ran across the hall, opened the drawing-room door, and saw his elders seated round the fire.

"Mother, I'm just going down the road to ask Hugh something."

"All right," Mrs. Grane called to him over her shoulder, no doubt thinking that the question was

about home-work. "Better put on your overcoat, it's so cold."

Martin was out of breath when he reached Creswick. In days of old he simply walked in without ring or knock, but now he gave the bell handle a pull.

"Master Hugh has gone out for a run, sir," said Sarah, who came to the door.

"Gone out!" said Martin faintly, and feeling as if some one had given him a hard blow on the chest.

"Yes, sir, he's not been gone more than ten minutes. Would you like to come in and wait till he comes back?"

The boy shook his head.

"Is there any message you'd like me to give him? I'll tell him as soon as he comes in."

"N—no thanks," stammered Martin. "I—er—I'm afraid it's too late. Good-night;—and, Sarah, you needn't tell him I called. I shall see him to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIX

THE HAUNTED WOOD

HAD Joan been seated at the tea-table in her own home instead of at Mrs. Craddock's she might have suspected that her brother had something weighing on his mind. All through the meal he hardly spoke a word, and more than once his brow puckered into a frown.

Hugh was angry both with himself and with Ludmoor. He knew now that he had been a fool to consent to join in this absurd errand to Birchwood, and he resented the way in which his services had been claimed in return for the salvage of the lost treasury notes. No decent fellow would expect to be repaid for a friendly act of that kind. But the real reason why Hugh had given the promise was that subtle form of cowardice, the fear of being thought afraid; and even now he could not see that whatever Ludmoor thought about him mattered nothing.

"This is the second time that fellow has let me in for a silly game," he pondered. "That meeting of the Excelsior Football Club might have ended in both of us getting into a row."

Mrs. Denston's voice roused him from his reverie.

"Your father and I are going to this lecture in the Town Hall, so Sarah will get the supper for you and Joan. I told her not to stay too long at Mrs. Craddock's; she'll be back by eight o'clock."

"All right, mother. I'm going out for a run presently, but I shan't be long. There's very little home-work been set for to-morrow."

"I shall be glad when this football match is over," sighed Mrs. Denston with a smile. "Well, don't get into a perspiration, and then stand about in the cold."

Hugh made his way to the breakfast-room, and turned up the gas. He unstrapped his school-books and tossed them down on the table. He was to meet Ludmoor at seven, and there was plenty of time for him to break the back of his home-work.

"There's no need to worry," he told himself. "It'll be just the same as a run to keep myself in training; and if that beggar thinks he's going to take it easy, he's mistaken. I'll set the pace."

Hugh settled down at the table, and with an effort of will banished Birchwood from his thoughts. He had finished one lesson and begun the next, when sounds reached him which told that Mr. and Mrs. Denston were leaving the house, starting early as they intended calling in to see a friend before going on to the Town Hall. Now they were gone, and nothing was to be heard but the ticking of the breakfast-room clock. Hugh missed the companionship of Joan, the silence grew oppressive, and his thoughts wandered from his work. He wondered what Winter was doing at that moment, and if the great man was thinking about the match. He imagined himself lining-up for the kick-off, then packing for a scrum, and one fancy followed another until the tick of the clock disturbed his reverie, and he realized that he must be moving if he meant to keep his appointment with Ludmoor.

"I can finish this when I get back," he muttered, at the same time placing a paper-weight on his text-book

to keep it open at the right place. "I'll just tell Sarah I'm going for a run, then I'm off."

A thick woollen scarf was the only extra garment he considered necessary to protect him from the cold. He buttoned its flowing ends under his jacket, set his cap firmly on his head, then let himself out through the front door. He set off at a trot, and found Ludmoor waiting for him at the bottom of Falcon Road.

"Advance, friend, and all's well," said Ludmoor. "No, you aren't late. I was a bit early. Fine night, eh?"

The sky overhead was cloudless, and in it shone a moon nearing its third quarter. The road was flooded with its soft radiance.

"I wish it was a bit darker," said Hugh. "We don't want to be seen getting in and out of that wood. It might be thought we were poaching."

"We shan't be spotted the way I'm going," promised Ludmoor. "Come on—better not run till we get out of the town."

They tramped off along King Street, then made a short cut down Baker's Row, and so reached the main road to Hayley Cross and Lenbury, a distant market town. Soon they had only a few scattered houses to pass before finding themselves in the open country. Hugh was talking about the match, when in the middle of a sentence he broke off short as he noticed something odd in his companion's dress.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "why d'you wear those mittens?"

"Mittens!" laughed Ludmoor; "never wore such things in my life. Oh, I see what you mean. I've got a white sweater on under my coat, and the sleeves are a bit too long."

"Were you wearing it that night you saw those fellows fooling about on the railway?"

"Yes, I believe I was."

"Then that's what old Priest mistook for mittens. By Jove! it's a good thing Winter hasn't spotted you on the playing-field with those cuffs sticking out from your coat sleeves, and coming down over the backs of your hands. He'd have thought they were white mittens, and he'd have been down on you like a hawk."

"But why should he be wroth with me for wearing a white sweater?"

Hugh replied to the question with a brief account of his conversation with Winter.

"Glad you told me," chuckled Ludmoor. "I must get some one to take a reef in these sleeves. In the meantime I'll turn up the cuffs. There, that's better; now we might as well have a run."

They swung along, and were some distance beyond the last house in the road when they passed a motor lorry which had broken down, and remained stranded by the roadside. A man stood by it awaiting the return of the driver, who had gone for assistance.

"Can you tell me the time, guv'nor?"

"Sorry, haven't got a watch on," called Hugh. "I should say it's about ten past seven."

They had not gone more than a stone's-throw beyond the lorry when Ludmoor turned off into a narrow by-road known as Gander's Lane. The movement was so sudden and unexpected that for a moment Hugh fancied his companion must have sighted danger ahead.

"What's up?" he growled. "Where are you going?"

"This is the best way," replied Ludmoor; "we shall

have it to ourselves. I told you I didn't mean to be spotted."

"But this blooming lane doesn't lead to Birchwood."

"No; but it goes past the Webley Grange estate. We can cut across the lower end of the park land, and get into the cover that way. If you go by the road there's always a chance that some one may come boasting along just at the wrong time."

The plan seemed wise, and the two boys trotted on down the lane without meeting a soul. It was not until they came to a halt, and prepared to clamber through a gap in the hedge, that Hugh felt doubtful. Gander's Lane was a public thoroughfare, and might be used as such without fear of interference, but as soon as they set foot on private property the risk began. Before his eyes lay a wide stretch of open country which had to be crossed in the clear light of the moon. The dark mass of the distant cover seemed far away.

"D'you think there's any chance of our being seen from the Grange—from the house, I mean?"

"Not a bit. It's behind some rising ground away yonder. Besides, no one would be looking out of window at this time of night."

"Well, as soon as we are through this hedge you'll have to stretch your legs," said Hugh. "I'm going to run."

The ground was covered at racing speed, and when, after clambering over an iron fence, they reached the friendly shelter of the cover, Ludmoor was glad of a halt to recover breath.

"You can stick it on," he panted. "If you do the same sort of thing to-morrow with the ball under your arm, you'll be over the line before the Schoolhouse backs know you are coming."

Though intended as a compliment, this reference to the match jarred on Hugh's ears like a false note in music. Until they were out of the wood, in more senses than one, he had no wish to be reminded of the coming contest. A moment ago, while chasing across the open, he had more than half expected to be challenged by some distant voice, and even now he was listening intently to make sure there was no pursuit. To his relief the silence remained unbroken.

"That's all right," he murmured.

"Right as rain," said Ludmoor, rather uplifted by the thought of being so near his goal. "I don't suppose we really need have come this way round. I vote we go back by the road. Now we'll get on with it."

He led the way along a footpath through the bushes till they reached the broad ride which ran through the heart of the cover. Here a moment's doubt as to the exact whereabouts of the obelisk caused a halt. The moonlight falling through the leafless branches of the trees made the frosted turf glisten like a carpet of silver.

"Looks like fairyland," said Ludmoor. "You might expect a lot of blooming fairies to hop out of the bushes, and start a dance."

Tink-tink-tink-tinkle-tink.

The faint, metallic sound followed Ludmoor's remark so quickly that his last word might have been the cue for some performer to start tapping on a tiny dulcimer.

"What the deuce is that?" he whispered.

"I don't know," chuckled Hugh. "The 'blooming fairies,' I suppose."

"Nonsense!" hissed Ludmoor. "Seemed to me more like some one jingling a bit of thin steel chain. Listen."

For a few moments no sound broke the deep hush of the cover ; then the fairy music came again, and this time more distinct.

Tink-tink-tinkle-tink.

"What on earth is it?" asked Ludmoor below his breath.

"Keep still; we shall see in a minute, if it crosses this ride."

Hugh did not feel nervous, but completely mystified. The little silvery note was coming nearer, but there was no sound of footsteps, no rustle of dead leaves and undergrowth such as would have been made by a dog. A pause, then *Tinkle-tink-tink* now quite close to where the listeners stood. Hugh strained his eyes peering through the leafless bushes, but without glimpsing any sign of movement. Again the stillness was deathlike. Ludmoor stared round him with his mouth half open, then he started violently as something rushed past his feet.

"My hat!—did you see that?" he gasped.

"Yes," laughed Hugh. "A silly cat—must have a bell fastened to its collar. I expect it belongs to the people at the Grange, and sneaks down here to do a bit of poaching."

Rather to his surprise, his companion did not seem inclined to treat the incident as a joke.

"I wish I'd given it a lift with the toe of my boot," he growled; then forcing a laugh, he continued: "I thought some one must have heard me say that about fairies, and started playing the fool."

"Why should any one be hiding in this wood?"

"It might have been a poacher."

"Ringing a little bell to show he was coming?"

"Well, I thought it was some one playing the fool,"

replied Ludmoor testily. "Steel might have sent a friend of his to queer my game. Buck up; we shan't get that rubbing if we stand here all night."

Though capable of a certain amount of reckless daring in acts done on the spur of the moment, Ludmoor's courage was not of a kind which can be relied on to stand any lengthy strain. He had been perky enough when they entered the cover, but it was clear that the stray cat episode had put his nerves on edge.

"Come on!" he growled.

In silence the two boys trotted up the grassy ride until they reached the monument. It stood in a small clearing shaped like a half-moon, the base resting on a granite foundation which had the appearance of a shallow step. An oblong patch, which looked black in the moonlight, marked the position of the bronze plate.

"Any one might think it was a gravestone," muttered Ludmoor.

"He wasn't buried here."

"No; but to see it in this light makes you feel as if you were in some beastly graveyard."

"Queer that the old Squire should have wished to mark the spot where the poor chap was found," said Hugh. "They'd been searching for hours, and it wasn't until after dark a man came along with a lantern and spotted a foot sticking out from behind one of the bushes."

"Oh, I know all that," interrupted Ludmoor snapshly. "Now all we have to do is to get the rubbing."

He advanced to the monument, stooped down, and began to wipe the moisture off the bronze plate with his handkerchief. Hugh stood watching, then turned his head; he could have sworn that somewhere away in the distance the deep stillness had been broken by a

low whistle, followed by a man's voice calling some such word as "Hullo!"

"I say," whispered Hugh, "I believe there's some one in this wood."

Ludmoor faced about with a quick twist of his body.

"What's the matter now?"

"I thought I heard a whistle, then some one spoke."

For several seconds the pair stood straining their ears, but not a sound was to be heard.

"I wish you wouldn't keep on giving false alarms," said Ludmoor pettishly. "The next thing will be you'll say you've seen the ghost. I've dried this plate so that it won't damp the paper. Now give me a hand. Take this torch."

The pair knelt down on the granite step, and spread a sheet of tracing-paper over the bronze plate. Hugh kept one side of the paper steady, and with his disengaged hand directed the beam of the electric torch while his companion worked away in nervous haste.

"This'll be good enough to show it's genuine," growled Ludmoor.

He had nearly finished the rubbing when the heel-ball slipped out of his fingers. Reaching to pick it up he turned his head, and gave a stifled yelp as if he had touched a hot coal.

"Yup!"

Not three feet behind him stood a dark figure, which from its silent and unexpected appearance might have risen from the ground. It was too much for Ludmoor. He was in an awkward position, resting on his heels; and, losing his balance, he rolled off the granite step as if felled by a blow.

CHAPTER XX

SAUVE QUI PEUT

STARTLED by Ludmoor's sudden collapse, Hugh swung round, and for a moment stood speechless ; the beam from his torch fell, not on a ghost, but on a being just as human as himself.

" Martin ! " he exclaimed, " I'm hanged if it isn't ! "

By the heaving of Martin's chest it was evident that he had arrived at the monument out of breath. He had been running light-footed up the ride, and no sound had given warning of his approach.

" Be quiet ! " he panted. " Don't flash that torch about. Switch it off."

" What the dickens brings you here ? Did you know we were coming ? "

" I knew. I called at Creswick, and Sarah told me you'd been gone about ten minutes. I thought I was too late, then it struck me I might be able to catch you up."

" Did you come down Gander's Lane ? "

" Yes, a man standing by a lorry told me two fellows had passed him, and turned down the lane. I guessed it was you, and the course you meant to follow. I came the same way—across the lower end of the park."

Ludmoor scrambled to his feet ; he snatched up the sheet of tracing-paper, and crammed it into his pocket.

He had recovered from the first shock of the alarm, and his face was twitching with rage.

"Look here, Grane, who asked you to come butting in?" he asked angrily; then, rounding on Hugh, "I suppose *you* told him?" he snarled.

"I didn't."

"Then how should he know where to find us? Of course you told him, and you promised you wouldn't say a word about it to any one. What a chap you are, Denston!"

"Hush—shut up!" hissed Martin. "Be jolly careful what you're about. That's what I've come to tell you. Keep quiet, and go back the way you came. There are some men watching the road."

"Watching the road!" echoed Ludmoor. "Seems to me as if all the world has been let into the secret."

"It's nothing to do with this rotten game of yours," began Martin, and in a few hurried sentences explained why the road was being watched. "I don't know where these ghost-hunters are hiding," he concluded. "It's not unlikely they're behind the hedge inside this cover."

"By Jove! I believe you're right," murmured Hugh. "I heard a whistle, away yonder, and that's the direction of the road."

"Why can't you two stop playing the fool?" stormed Ludmoor. "I don't believe a word you say, Denston. I'll never trust you again. You swore you'd keep your mouth shut, then you went straight off and told Grane."

"He didn't tell me," declared Martin.

"Then who did?"

"I'm not going to tell you how I got to know. Get out of this as fast as you can; that's all you need care about."

Ludmoor's teeth chattered as if he had just come out

of the water after a long bathe on a cold day. He was feeling the after effect of his recent fright, and he flared up again as a fresh idea flashed into his mind.

"Oh, I see it all now," he sneered. "Steel put you two fellows up to this—to give me a scare, and make me bolt before I took the rubbing. Well, you're too late—it's done now, and I've got it in my pocket. A beastly mean game you've been playing. Give me my torch."

He snatched the lamp out of Hugh's hand, and in so doing inadvertently pressed the stud. A brilliant beam of light shot across the ride.

"Don't keep flashing that torch," said Martin. "Haven't you got any sense? I'll take jolly good care I never go out of my way again to give you a warning."

"You won't get a chance," scoffed Ludmoor, switching off the torch. "I shall know better in future than to trust blighters like Steel and Fawcett to keep a promise. It's all a lie about this ghost-hunt, and men watching the road. That's the way I'm going back, and I don't want to say another word to either of you. I'm off."

Mad with rage he strode across the ride, and almost before his companions realized what he was doing he had disappeared in the undergrowth, heading in the direction of the highroad.

"Come back!" called Martin as loudly as he dared, but no notice was taken of his call. For a moment he was inclined to rush after Ludmoor and attempt to drag him back by the scruff of his neck, then abandoned the idea as sheer folly.

"If those men are waiting inside the wood, that silly ass will come barging into the middle of them," whispered Hugh.

"Of course he will, but it's his own fault. I've done all I could to stop him."

"Then we'd better scoot."

"Wait a bit—listen."

For a few seconds the two cousins stood straining their ears, then Hugh gave his cousin a nudge with his elbow. A crashing of twigs told that Ludmoor was returning, and coming at a run. He tripped over a root, and nearly went headlong as he plunged into the ride; then, without a word to his school-fellows, he dashed past them, and once more disappeared from view.

"They're after him," snapped Martin, "and he doesn't care a brass farthing what becomes of you and me."

To have run down the moonlit ride meant the risk of being seen by the ghost-hunters, who probably had longer legs than the two boys, and would run them down in a few seconds. Both cousins realized this danger in a moment; with mutual consent they darted round the monument, and dived into the bushes which fringed the clearing.

"Keep as quiet as you can," urged Martin. "If they don't hear us, they won't know which way we've gone."

The first stage of their wild retreat seemed to Hugh like a nightmare. Till now he might have thought that to run through a wood on a clear night was a fairly easy thing to do, but he found it more difficult than any obstacle race he had ever entered for in the school sports. Fortunately for the fugitives, the moonlight enabled them to steer a course through the bushes; though twice it seemed as if the thickets held them like a net. Branches slapped them in the face, and brambles

clutched their ankles as they stumbled on. Once they were over their boot tops in a patch of bog. They were out of breath when they reached the edge of the cover, and flung themselves over the iron fence.

"Thought so," grunted Martin. "See him? There he goes!"

Ludmoor's shadowy figure was seen pounding on ahead, making a bee-line across the park for Gander's Lane. He had never given such a display of energy on the playing-field, and it was panic gave him speed. Yard by yard he was overhauled, and the other two were close behind him as he crashed through a weak place in the hedge. Then he seemed to lose all sense of direction; instead of making for the highroad he turned the opposite way, and tore off down the lane.

"Confound that chap!" gasped Hugh, "where's he going?"

"He must be mad," replied Martin. "He'll keep chasing round the country till he's collared. We'd better go after him, and bring him back."

The two cousins scrambled through the hedge, paused a moment to recover breath, then started in pursuit of Ludmoor, glad to have solid ground beneath their feet. On they went, down a gentle slope, round a turning, then checked their pace as they sighted an obstacle fifty yards ahead—the white gate of a level crossing.

"There he is," panted Hugh. "Come back, you fool!"

Ludmoor heard the call, but made no reply. He passed through a side gate which clashed behind him; then, when half-way over the crossing, he turned like a wild creature at bay.

"Why can't you two fellows leave me alone?" he snarled.

"Where on earth are you going?" cried Martin.

"It's no use going the other way. Some of that gang may have cut along the road, and be waiting for us at the top of the lane."

"What gang?"

"Those fellows you told us were hiding in the wood. At first I thought you were rotting, but I saw two of them—nearly ran into their arms."

"Did they see you?"

"Don't know if they *saw* me, but they must have heard me running. I was just going to cross an open space when two men came out from under the shadow of a tree. I turned and scooted for all I was worth."

"You'll go miles out of your way if you don't come back by the lane," said Martin. "Wait a jiff."

He passed through the side gate, followed by Hugh. Ludmoor remained standing in the six-foot way; to right and left the double track of metals glistened in the moonlight. The trio listened; for half a minute they remained silent, but there was no sound of pursuit from the direction of Birchwood.

"I don't believe those fellows saw you," began Martin. "They'd have shouted—called after you to stop."

"They wouldn't have shouted if they meant to take us by surprise. They were coming to the monument, and that was your fault, Denston. You would keep flashing that torch about, and they must have seen the light."

"You did it yourself," retorted Hugh. "And you might have given us a warning of some sort, instead of which you ran past us without a word."

"I wasn't going to yell *cave* at the top of my voice. Might as well have shouted to those men, and told them which way I was going."

"Well, come back up the lane," urged Martin. "You

don't want to go roaming about the country half the night, do you ? ”

Ludmoor stood his ground as if determined to follow his own line of retreat as soon as he had got rid of Hugh and Martin. All three were breathing heavily after their run from Birchwood, and they eyed one another like angry dogs. Had they been in a calmer frame of mind they might have thought it wise to move one way or the other, and not continue their parley in the middle of the level crossing.

“ D’you hear what I say ? ” cried Martin.

“ I won’t ever trust you two fellows again. You told me a rotten lie.”

“ You called me a liar when I told you there was a party of men watching for the ghost. I suppose you’ll believe it now that you’ve seen ’em with your own eyes.”

“ I’m not talking about that,” fumed Ludmoor. “ Denston gave me his word of honour he wouldn’t say anything about our going to Birchwood to-night ; then he went off and told you, Grane.”

“ He didn’t.”

“ He did. I heard you tell him you’d called at his house before you started, which shows there must have been some arrangement between you.”

How long the dispute might have continued, and whether it would have ended in blows, is hard to say. Suddenly it was interrupted by a gruff voice.

“ Hey !—what are you lads doing on the line ? ”

The challenge was followed by the click of the side gate opposite the one through which the boys had passed. Two men came striding across the down-line, a plate-layer named Sprode, and close behind him the out-porter, Priest.

"What are you doing 'ere?" growled Sprode.

"I suppose any one has a right to walk over this crossing," replied Ludmoor defiantly.

"And that's just what you aren't doing. You've been standing here talking for some time. We 'eard your voices before we got to the gate; thought there might have been an accident, and some one been knocked down by a train."

"Up to mischief of some kind, I'll be bound," chimed in Priest. "Ah, boys from the King's School—I can tell that by your caps. Yes," continued the speaker, raising his voice to a shout, "and look at that!"

Hugh felt as if the solid timber of the crossing was giving way beneath his feet; he saw in a moment what had caught the man's eye. Ludmoor had tucked the cuffs of his sweater up under his coat sleeves, but during the race from Birchwood they had come down again over the backs of his hands.

"You was wearing those same white mittens the night the fog-signals was put on the line," continued Priest excitedly. "What's more, I had a glimpse of your face after I passed the gas-lamp, and thought I recognized it, though I wasn't sure. Now I know—you're Mr. Austin Ludmoor's son."

"I never stopped that train," declared Ludmoor hotly.

"You was there, and I suppose these other two are the ones I saw standing on the embankment. Yes, and I'll venture to say you've been plotting to play some such game on the railway again to-night."

"Nothing of the sort; we just came out for a walk."

"There was some scheme you was arguing about. If you was out for a walk, why should you want to stand talking in the middle of this crossing?"

"Look 'ere, my lad," began Sprode, "if you've got any of them detonators about you, just 'and 'em over. Now then, give 'em up."

"I've never had such a thing as a detonator in my hand for a single moment," protested Ludmoor. "You can search me if you don't believe what I say."

Sprode thrust his hand into the boy's pocket, and produced the crumpled rubbing. He smoothed out the sheet of paper, and gazed at it in the moonlight.

"What's all this black mess?" he growled. "Looks to me as if there'd been gunpowder wrapped up in this."

He raised the paper to his nose, and sniffed. "If you've been putting powder about on the line, you'd better own up pretty quick."

"It isn't powder," declared Martin. "It's a tracing done with heel-ball. You'll see that if you strike a match."

Sprode sniffed again, then seemed satisfied. He crushed the paper into a ball and tossed it into the hedge.

"One thing's certain," said Priest. "Now I know who it was I saw under the gas-lamp. There's no getting out of that, my lad."

Ludmoor cursed himself inwardly as he remembered the confession he had made to Hugh. Always ready to think other fellows as mean spirited as he was himself, he felt the ice was cracking all round him, and was bound to give way. Denston knew that the out-porter was right, and of course Denston would sneak, if by so doing he could gain any advantage for himself and Martin Grane. It struck Ludmoor that he had better lay his cards on the table before they were snatched out of his hand.

"Look here," he began, "I'll tell you just what happened. I had no more to do with putting those detonators on the line than you had yourself. I was walking along Chelfield Road, and stopped to see what those two fellows were doing on the embankment. . . ."

"And who were they?" asked Sprode.

"I didn't know at the time, but I've found out since that one is a boy called Bramble, and the other a pal of his named Shard. But it would be no good charging them with it now; they're a couple of blackguards, and they'd simply swear they weren't there."

"And you mean to tell us that these lads who've been out larking about with you to-night weren't the ones who stopped that train?"

"No, they had nothing at all to do with it."

"Well, I've got you," snarled Priest. "You've owned to it, and in the hearing of Mr. Sprode, so he'll be a witness if one's needed. I'll be up at the King's School early to-morrow morning, and see Mr. Alwing. He'll get the truth as to whether these other two were with you, I'll be bound."

"But he's told you we had nothing to do with it," protested Hugh.

"I'm not going to hear another word," cried Priest. "Anything more you've got to say can be said when you're in front of the headmaster. Now, off you go."

"Yes, get off this crossing," said Sprode. "Back you go—same way as you come."

There was nothing for it but to obey the command; the three boys passed through the swing gate, and marched on up the lane. Priest and Sprode followed at a distance of about twenty yards, as if to give them no chance of doubling back to the line. Hugh felt like a person recovering his senses after having been half

stunned by a blow ; only now could he begin to reckon what this disaster really meant.

" There'll be a most unholy row if that fellow tells Alwing," he groaned.

" It's your own fault—yours and Grane's," said Ludmoor. " If you two hadn't come after me, and stopped me on that crossing, it would never have happened. If I'd been walking on down the lane by myself I should have passed those men, and they wouldn't have taken the slightest notice. If you fellows——"

" If—if—if," interrupted Martin scornfully. " There's one ' if ' would have saved all this bother. If you'd owned up when we had that inquiry in the gym, the Head would have believed you. He'd have been able to tell the stationmaster that Priest's story about a party of boys from the King's School fooling about on the line was a mistake."

" It's all very well for you to talk about owning up," raged Ludmoor. " Why don't you own up that it was Denston who told you I was going to Birchwood to-night ? You're a couple of rotten liars—yes, the pair of you."

Maddened already by the thoughts which were passing through his mind, this mean abuse was more than Hugh could endure.

" I won't stand that ! " he exploded. " Call me a liar again and I'll give you a dashed good licking."

For a moment it seemed as if there would have been a stand-up fight in the middle of the lane, then Martin seized his cousin's arm.

" Those men are close behind, and they'll be down on us again if you start scrapping," he said quickly. " It'll only make matters worse than they are already."

" He shan't keep on calling me a liar. He's done it too often. Now I'll——"



"I'm not going to hear another word."

"Don't be a fool."

"I may be a fool, but I'm not a liar."

"Oh, shove all the blame on me, and have done with it," cried Ludmoor. "You two fellows wouldn't leave me alone, and you've only got yourselves to thank for what's coming."

He quickened his pace, and strode on ahead to show that he wished to part company with the other two, an act which seemed somehow to lessen the strain. Hugh unclenched his fists, and fell into step beside his cousin.

"Martin, I'm sorry you should have been dragged into this bother, and it's all my fault."

"Oh, I suppose I made a mess of it," was the reply. "I thought I might be able to prevent you and Ludmoor running into those ghost-hunters."

"No, I've been a fool all along," sighed Hugh; then, struck with a sudden thought: "D'you think it would be any use to turn back, and offer Priest five bob if he'll keep quiet?"

"Not a bit; if we tried to bribe him, it would only make him all the more convinced that you and I had a hand in stopping that train."

"There'll be a fearful row to-morrow if he speaks to the Head."

"I know there will, and you don't want him to tell Alwing that we offered him money if he'd keep his mouth shut."

No ghost-hunters were found lying in wait at the top of the lane; but for Ludmoor's stupidity in bolting off panic-stricken down to the railway, all three boys might have been safely home by now. Hugh still clung to some vague and desperate hope of coming to terms with Priest; when, on reaching the town, he looked back to find that the two men were no longer shepherding them, but had turned down a side street, the last chance of escape seemed gone.

"Martin, old chap," he said hoarsely, "I've done for myself. There's one thing certain, and that is I shan't play in the match to-morrow. I don't know what Alwing will do with us—most likely keep us in the whole afternoon."

"He may let you play."

"I don't think he will. What's more, Winter will be furious. He'll be frightfully sick at this bother about

the railway coming to a head just before his last match. He'll think I've been deceiving him all along. You may bet your life Winter will kick me out of the team."

"Oh, I don't know," murmured Martin sympathetically, "I don't know. Let's hope——"

He ceased speaking, troubled with an odd recollection of the packet he had discovered lying on the dining-room mantelpiece at home. There seemed very little chance that he would use that green-and-white rosette on the morrow, or that Joan would be wearing hers. It would be a frightful blow to Joan, and she might hold him partly responsible for this final disaster. She would think he ought to have acted more promptly—have done something directly after his talk with Geach instead of waiting till nearly seven o'clock before he made a move. That would be difficult, if not impossible to explain.

"They'll think I've gone clean off my onion," Hugh said suddenly.

"Who—Winter and the other fellows in the team?"

"No—my people; I shall have to tell them to-night as soon as they come back from the lecture. I expect Joan's home by this time, so she'll be the first to hear the glad news."

"I was thinking about Joan," said Martin in a doleful voice. "Let her down gently. Need you tell Joan to-night? I should leave it till to-morrow morning."

"Oh, she's got to know, and it'll give her warning not to stay up messing about till the band begins to play. No, if she's got any sense she'll scoot off to bed, and pull the clothes over her head."

"You talk as if you were expecting the roof to fall on you."

"That's about what will happen when the guv'nor hears what I've been doing. And I've let you in for having the same blooming row with your folk, Martin. I quarrelled with you about nothing, and I've treated you in a rotten stupid way ever since."

"My good man, don't worry about that; let's think if anything can be done. Ludmoor said he knew the fellows who were on the embankment. Can't we get hold of them?"

"What's the good? You and I can't swear we saw them put those detonators on the line, and who's going to believe Ludmoor? Every one knows, or will know to-morrow, that Ludmoor's word is worth nothing."

Martin nodded; in vain he taxed his brain to suggest any other way of escape.

"There's only one thing needed to round off the whole business," began Hugh with a mirthless laugh; "that is for Joan to have played the fool, and done something outrageous at this tea-party of hers—smashed all the best china or set the blessed house on fire. Then we should all be in the soup."

"Get away!" snapped Martin. "Joan's out of it. I expect you'll find her eating her supper in peace and quiet."

They reached Falcon Road, and tramped up it in gloomy silence. On arriving at his own front gate Hugh felt that he could not endure being left to his own thoughts.

"You might come in," he said, "if it's only for five minutes. There's no one at home except Sarah. If Joan has come back, I shall tell her I want to talk to you about something private, and she needn't know till after you're gone."

"Very well," agreed Martin. "Yes, perhaps we'd

better have a talk, and decide what we are going to say when Alwing sends for us to-morrow."

He pushed open the gate, stepped inside, then came to a halt.

"Hark!" he muttered. "Sounded as if some one had just shut your front door."

"It's too early for them to have come home from the lecture. Hullo, who's this?"

There was a patter of feet, and Joan herself came racing down the drive. She was wearing her outdoor things, and was carrying a small parcel wrapped in brown paper.

"Here—I—I say," stammered Hugh. "It's about time you were in bed. Where are you off to now?"

"Back to Mrs. Craddock's," replied the girl breathlessly. "Hugh—Martin, I've got something awfully exciting to tell you."

"Tell us now."

"Can't stop," Joan called back over her shoulder. "Wait till I come back."

CHAPTER XXI

FOUND AT LAST!

"COME in here," said Hugh.

Followed by Martin, he entered the breakfast-room, and turned up the gas. For a moment his glance fell upon his school-books lying on the table, one with the paper-weight placed upon it to keep it open at the right place. That seemed to have been done ages ago, and by some other boy—surely he himself would have known better than to abandon his home-work to start off on a mad errand with Ludmoor.

"I don't know how it is," began Martin, as he dropped down on the nearest chair; "I feel jolly tired—glad of a rest."

"So do I," sighed Hugh. "We haven't really gone very far, and I must be in good training; but I feel more fagged than as if I'd been out all the afternoon following the hounds. It's not the running—it's all this bother that's done me in."

He fidgeted about, found a box of matches, and lit the gas fire which he had extinguished before leaving the house.

"You needn't do that for me," said Martin; "I can't stay long."

"It's all right; I'm not going to sit in a cold room after you've gone. It was jolly good of you to come after us to give us warning about those ghost-hunters;

but I wish you'd stayed at home. Then you'd never have been dragged into this mess."

Hugh's voice quavered, then ceased abruptly, as if the clockwork of his speech had run down. He seated himself, and signed to his cousin to draw his chair nearer the fire. There was a silence, Martin staring at the opposite wall, with puckered brows, as if it had been a blackboard on which Mr. Dolphin had just drawn the figure of some new and amazingly difficult problem in geometry. A full minute passed before he spoke.

"You're going to tell your people as soon as they come back from the lecture?"

"Bound to; if I leave it till to-morrow, it'll seem as if I'm telling them because I can't keep it dark any longer."

"Yes, you'd better get it off your chest; and it's just struck me that if Uncle Frank knows at once, he might be able to do something."

"What on earth can he do?"

"He might see Priest, and persuade him not to speak to Alwing in the morning. Priest said he wouldn't hear another word from us, but he might listen to Uncle Frank. I don't suppose the old chap will have gone to bed——"

"Oh, it's not a bit of use," interrupted Hugh. "The whole story is bound to come out; that chap Sprode knows it, and he'll spread it about if Priest doesn't."

"Yes, there's Sprode to be reckoned with," admitted Martin. "I'd forgotten Sprode."

He leant back in his chair, and stretched his weary limbs.

"I wonder what's become of Joan," he murmured.

"Joan!" echoed Hugh, suddenly reminded of his errant sister. "Yes, I'd like to know what that kid's

been doing. I suppose I ought to have chased after her, and brought her back. She's no business to go off capering round the town at this time of night.

"What did I say when we were coming up the road?" continued the speaker excitedly. "I said it only needed Joan to do something funny to round off the whole business, and that's just what she has done. Silly little goat, if she must go smashing up the Craddocks' happy home, why couldn't she have done it some other night? That's just like Joan, and it's no good my talking to her—not a bit."

"Nor of her talking to you," said Martin with a laugh. "I don't think she's got herself into a row—didn't sound like it when she passed us down by the gate. She said she'd tell us something when she came back."

"Shows it must be something wicked, or she'd have told us then and there," growled Hugh.

There was another period of gloomy silence.

"Look here," began Martin. "It strikes me I'd better stay here till Uncle Frank comes. Then, when you speak to him, I shall be able to back you up by telling him all I know about this rotten business."

"Jolly good of you if—if you don't mind," said Hugh fervently. "But what will your folks think when they get back home, and find you aren't there? It'll give Aunt Margaret a fright. She may think you've gone off somewhere, and met with an accident."

"I'll run down to our place and scribble a note for them to see when they come in. Just tell them where I am."

Martin rose from his chair, crossed the floor, then paused.

"If Joan comes back before I do, make some excuse,

and get her out of the way. I don't see there's any need for her to be told anything before we've spoken to Uncle Frank. See what I mean?"

"I'll just hear what she's got to say, then I'll set Sarah on her, and get her packed off to bed," promised Hugh. "So-long, old sportsman."

As the door closed, Hugh hitched his chair forward, and sat brooding over the fire. His mind was full of dreadful imaginings what the interview with Mr. Alwing would be like. Priest would be there, affirming his belief that the three boys he and Sprode had found on the level crossing were the same trio he had seen beside the line just before the train was stopped. It was a question if anything Ludmoor said about Shard and Bramble would be believed. Ludmoor had declared in the hearing of a whole lot of fellows that he knew nothing about the railway outrage; it would be shown that he was a liar, and the Head would come down on him like a steam-hammer.

"Alwing will think we're birds of the same feather. And the whole school will be ready to boot us round the quad. My hat! we shall have a time of it—life won't be worth living."

He started as the door opened, then turned and saw that it was Sarah who had entered the room.

"Oh, so you've come back, Master Hugh. I've put the supper ready for you and Miss Joan in the dining-room. You'd better have it now; it's been there waiting for you some time."

"Joan's gone back to Mrs. Craddock's. Martin and I met her as we came in at the gate. Seems to me she's been giving them a lively time down at Chestnut Avenue."

"I suppose I ought not to have let her go out again,"

sighed Sarah. "She ran upstairs, then came down and raced off all in a hurry. She called out something of which I couldn't catch the meaning—something about a black cat."

"Cat!—Oh, so that's what she'd got tucked under her arm. It's just a wooden image, and she's taken it to show Mrs. Craddock because she thinks it's lucky. All right. I'll tell her about supper as soon as she comes in. She'll be back in a few minutes."

Sarah retired to the kitchen. Hugh rose from his chair, and began to pace restlessly about the room. He was trying to think what he should say to his father, what excuse he could possibly make for going to Birchwood. The story would be a long one, and where should he begin? Footsteps sounded in the hall, and Hugh gave a sigh of relief as Martin reappeared.

"Has Joan come back?" he asked in a low tone.

"No, Sarah's just been on to me about her. Look here, old chap, if you really mean to stay, you won't want to keep your coat on all the time. Better hang it on the stand."

Martin took off his overcoat, and was about to step out into the hall, when he stopped himself with a jerk.

"She's coming," he whispered.

There was a sound of the front door opening, then of Joan speaking, and of a reply in a man's voice. Almost before the boys realized what was going to happen, Joan came tripping down the hall, and entered the breakfast-room followed by Mr. Craddock.

"I thought this is where we should find you," she chirruped. "You've seen Martin already, Mr. Craddock; and this is my brother, Hugh."

"I'm sorry to disturb you," said the visitor, smiling as he shook hands. "I walked back with Joan, and

it's given me the chance of asking you about this creature."

He produced the black cat from his pocket ; the two boys gazed at it in silent astonishment.

"Not likely to win a prize at the Crystal Palace," he laughed. "It's a funny thing, just when your sister was preparing to come home something was said which set us talking about charms and talismans—the sort of things that are supposed to bring you good fortune, or to ward off evil. Joan told us she had a black cat which she thought was lucky. She described its glass eyes, and the bow of green ribbon round its neck, and it struck me at once that she must have got hold of our lost mascot."

"We didn't know it was yours," said Hugh. "We found it lying on the drive of the house next door."

"So I hear."

"Do tell them what it is," said Joan breathlessly. "We'll sit down ; there's no reason why we should keep standing all the time."

Wondering what was coming next, Hugh and Martin put chairs, and the party formed a semicircle round the fire.

"It's difficult to know where to start," began Mr. Craddock, then turning to Martin, "You remember my saying I'd had a stroke of bad luck ? "

"Yes, the day we came for the chesterfield," replied Martin with a grin.

"To clear the ground I must tell you of something that happened about three weeks ago. One afternoon I drove my wife in a little two-seater car of ours to see an old friend of hers who lives about two miles away, just this side of Hayley Cross. It's a small house, with a footpath from the garden gate to the front door ; and,

as there was no carriage drive, I left the car standing by the side of the road. We had a cup of tea with our friend, Mrs. Lambert, and she walked down to the gate with us to wish us good-bye. But, when we stepped out into the road, the car was gone."

"D'you mean it had been stolen?" asked Hugh.

"Yes; some rascal must have come along when there was no one in sight, and suddenly decided to pinch my car; so he'd hopped in, and driven away. Of course I reported the matter to the police, and they've been making inquiries. I don't suppose there's a garage in the country that has not been notified, but with no result. The car seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. I never heard anything more about it until to-night."

"Until I brought back the mascot," put in Joan.

"My wife's sister is a very clever wood-carver," continued Mr. Craddock. "For fun she made this cat, and sent it for us to carry on our car. Joan tells me that you boys found it lying on the carriage drive of the next house along the road."

"That's right," said Hugh. "But how could it have got there?"

"It must have been working loose, and dropped off the car. There had been no chance for the thief to make any plans beforehand, and my idea is that he ran the car up this drive to give himself time to decide what he meant to do before he went any farther. He may have discovered that he had not enough 'juice' for a long journey, so left the car parked in the carriage drive while he went somewhere for another tin of petrol."

"He must have known that the house was empty, or he wouldn't have gone there," said Martin.

"Just so; that's an important point," replied Mr. Craddock. "It makes one inclined to think the thief must have been some rascal from the town. That may help the police when I tell them about this mascot. To save my troubling you again, I wonder if you would mind showing me just where it was found."

"Not a bit," said Hugh. "We'll go now."

All four rose from their chairs, and as they did so Joan glanced at the clock.

"Goodness, look at the time!" she exclaimed. "I'd like to come too, but I suppose I can't. I must have my supper and get off to bed. Good-night, Mr. Craddock. Good-night, Martin—see you again to-morrow. Did you get my parcel?"

"Y-yes," stammered Martin. "Jolly good of you, and—er—thanks very much."

The story of the stolen car had interested him so much that for a few moments he had almost forgotten his own misfortune; now this reference to the green-and-white rosette brought it all back to his mind. Joan was evidently very pleased with herself, and would retire to rest looking forward to excitement of a happier kind on the morrow. And in the morning she would be let down with a crash.

"Come on," said Hugh, and hurried out into the hall to get his cap.

They walked quickly, the two boys anxious to get back before Mr. and Mrs. Denston returned from the lecture. Not a word was spoken until they came to a halt in front of the empty house. It rose before them silent and deserted, a more depressing sight, so Martin thought, than the monument in the haunted cover.

"This is where I picked it up," said Hugh. "When

I stepped on it I thought at first that it was a big stone. You see it was a dark night, and not moonlight as it is now."

Martin clicked his tongue, struck with a sudden idea. He turned to Mr. Craddock.

"When did you say the car was stolen?" he asked.

"I've been asked to give the exact date so often that it's one I'm not likely to forget," laughed Mr. Craddock.

"It was Thursday, the twenty-third of November."

"Then I believe it was the same night we came here to find my aeroplane," began Martin. "Yes, that was on a Thursday, and it was the third week in November. I'll bet you the thieves were hanging about the place then. Hugh told me he heard voices in the stable-yard, and he saw a man hiding behind an arch in the garden. Hugh, old chap, I'm sorry I didn't believe you, and I beg your pardon."

"Oh, that's all right, that's all right," murmured Hugh. "If it was the thief, he must have come along to find out who we were, and then dodged off into hiding; so it wasn't your fault that you didn't see him when you came back through the arch."

There was a pause.

"D'you say there's a stable-yard here?" asked Mr. Craddock.

"Yes; to get to it you go round the house," replied Martin.

"H'm, I'd like to see it. That's where the thief may have gone before making his next move. Where we are standing now is out of sight of any one passing the front gate, but it may have seemed safer to leave the car in the yard."

In silence they followed the curve of the drive, and reached the stable-yard. The gate was unlatched, and

hardly had he passed through it than Martin stopped short, and laid his hand on Mr. Craddock's arm.

"Look!" he whispered.

He pointed across the yard, and his companion saw at once what had caught his eye. There was a lamp burning in the coach-house; a gleam of yellow light came through an oblong space at the top of one of the windows, as if a blind had fallen a few inches and then stuck.

"Queer!—you'd think no one had any business to be there so late in the day," said Mr. Craddock in a low tone. "Keep quiet, you two—wait till I come back."

Warily, and on tiptoe, he crossed the yard. The boys lost sight of him as he passed into the deep shadow of the building; they waited, and presently saw him retracing his steps with one hand upraised, giving a signal for silence.

"There's some one in that coach-house," he whispered. "I could hear them talking. They've got a piece of sacking rigged up to cover the inside of the window, and that looks suspicious. I gave the double doors a very gentle push with my finger-tips, but they are bolted on the inside."

"The way into the coach-house is through the stable," said Hugh. "Then you can unbolt the double doors."

"Oh! I see what you mean," murmured Mr. Craddock. "I'd like to get a peep at these people, and see what they're doing."

With stealthy tread, like Indians on the warpath, they approached the stable; a gentle pressure raised the thumb-latch, and the door was found to be unlocked. As it opened the sound of voices became audible.

"Wait here," whispered Mr. Craddock.

He stepped into the stable, and the two boys listened,

holding their breath. It was only for a few seconds that they were left in suspense, then they both started as if a cracker had exploded close to their ears.

"You rascal!" shouted Mr. Craddock. "So I've found you at last!"

There was no need now for further caution. Hugh and Martin dashed through the stable, and the next moment were peering over Mr. Craddock's shoulder. The coach-house was lit by a tin reflector lamp hung on the wall. Beside a small motor-car were two persons, instantly recognized by Hugh as Bramble and Shard. The latter had a paint-brush in his hand, and both were standing motionless, with rounded eyes and mouths half open as if petrified with astonishment.

"Yes, I see what you're doing," said Mr. Craddock. "Think it a good idea to change the colour of the car by giving it a new coat of enamel. Still, as it's my car, you might have asked me—— Oh no, you don't!"

Suddenly it seemed as if the spell had been broken. Shard sprang towards the lamp, but before he could reach it Mr. Craddock's hand was on his collar. He wrenched himself free, swung round, and struck out viciously with his fists. His opponent parried the blows with the skill of a practised boxer; then there was a smack, and down went Shard full length on the brick floor.

"That may teach you to behave yourself," growled Mr. Craddock. "Hullo!"

He turned just in time to witness the end of another encounter. Bramble had made a wild rush for the door opening into the stable. He bent his head, hoping to bring off the same trick he had played on Jason, but this time he was up against a fellow who played rugby. Hugh side-stepped, then made a spring, and down came



Shard had raised himself into a sitting posture.

Bramble with a force which for the moment knocked all the breath out of his body.

Hugh was on his feet again in a second. Bramble lay gasping for a few moments, then he rolled over and raised his head. With the two boys standing over him he realized there was no chance of escape.

"It wasn't my doing," he whined. "It wasn't me as stole the car."

"Then who did steal it?" demanded Hugh.

"'Twas Shard; I met him driving it, and he told me to get in and have a ride. Then he let out he found it standing by the side of the road near Hayley Cross, and he asked if I knew of a safe place where he could stow it away. So I told him there was an empty coach-house and stable——"

"You young villain!" interrupted Mr. Craddock.

"So you've been keeping it here till you thought the hue and cry would be over. Now you've decided it's about time to get a move on, so you come here to-night to start work altering the appearance of the car. Then no doubt you meant to take it away to some distant place, sell it at a bargain price to some dealer, and share the money. Is that something else you've stolen?"

The object at which the speaker pointed was an old leather bag which lay on the floor close to the car.

"No, it ain't stolen," protested Bramble. "It belongs to Shard. It's what he keeps his tools and things in—he thought he might want to use some on 'em."

"Just have a look at it, one of you," said Mr. Craddock. "See what's inside."

Hugh undertook the search. At first he saw nothing but a collection of old rusty tools, scraps of metal, and a tangled mass of wire and string; then suddenly he gave a cry, and straightened his back with a jerk as if he had touched a piece of hot iron.

"Look at this!" he cried.

He held up what Mr. Craddock thought was a small metal tin, but Martin saw in a moment—it was a detonator.

"You beggar!" cried Hugh, rounding on Bramble. "So it was you stopped that train—oh, I know all about it now, so you needn't try to make excuses."

"It was Shard's doing," gasped Bramble. "I told him he'd better not, but he wouldn't listen."

Shard had raised himself into a sitting posture, rocking himself to and fro with his hands clasped to his head, and paying no heed to what was going on around him. Now he seemed for the first time to become conscious of what Bramble was saying.

"You young cur, trying to lay all the blame on me, are you?" he snarled. "Well, you've done it now, so go on—say what you like."

"We found four of them on a ledge in a plate-layer's hut," continued Bramble, almost in tears. "We came along the line, and I said I didn't think the detonators was any good as they'd be damp. Shard said he didn't think they'd go off, but he'd like to try; so he put two of 'em on the metals, and waited on the embankment till a train went by. They went off like a couple of guns, and we ran for it as fast as we could. I told him he'd better get rid of the other two detonators, but he stowed 'em away in that bag."

Mr. Craddock beckoned Martin aside, and spoke in a low tone.

"Just run as quick as you can to the police station, explain what's happened, and they'll send a man back with you. Oh, I can keep these two beauties quiet; besides, I've got your cousin to help guard the door."

Martin passed out into the stable, then he came back and signed to Hugh that he wished to say something.

"As soon as I've brought the bobby," he whispered, "I shall scoot off and tell old Priest the two fellows who stopped that train have been caught. That'll keep him from turning up at the King's School in the morning."

"Yes, get at him," replied Hugh quickly. "Hold him if you can, for goodness' sake."

CHAPTER XXII

OUT OF THE WOOD

“ HULLO ! ” shouted Hugh.

He had gobbled down his breakfast, and for five minutes he had been waiting impatiently in the road for Martin, who had just come in sight, and who gave his bundle of school-books a swing in answer to the hail.

“ Hurry up ! ” called Hugh. “ I had half a mind to dash down to your place before breakfast. Tell me quick—did you see Priest last night ? ”

“ Yes, I stormed the fortress, but it took some doing.”

“ Tell me all about it. Where does he live ? ”

“ In a little house down Archer Street. He’d just finished his supper when I got there. I said I’d something very important to tell him, so he let me come into his kitchen ; but as soon as he saw who I was he got in a fearful rage.”

“ Why ? ”

“ Oh, he thought I’d come simply to beg him to let us off. So he said he wasn’t going to listen to any more excuses, not a single word, and that I was to clear off jolly quick. I think he’d have taken me by the scruff of the neck, and run me out into the street, if it hadn’t been for Maggie.”

“ Who on earth is Maggie ? ”

“ Mrs. Priest, though I didn’t know her Christian name till her husband barked at her, ‘ Now, Maggie, don’t you

interfere.' She's a good old soul, just as stout as Priest is lean, and with a face like a full moon. She wouldn't keep quiet. 'Reuben,' she said, 'you're always claiming that every one has the right of freedom of speech, so let the lad say what he wants to say.' "

" Good old Maggie," murmured Hugh.

" Well then, I talked as fast as ever I could ; told him what had happened up in Falcon Road, and how we'd caught the fellows who'd stopped that train. At first he wouldn't believe it."

" I thought he wouldn't. I was afraid last night that's where you'd come to grief."

" He said it was just a tale I'd made up to put him off going to see Mr. Alwing. I told him he'd only get into a row with the Head if he kept on declaring that those detonators had been put on the line by boys from the King's School, when it was known now that it wasn't done by any of our fellows ; but he only growled and shook his head. Then I got desperate, and asked him to come round with me to the police station. I said I'd just been there, and he'd soon find that what I'd been telling him was true."

" Good idea ! Did he take you on ? "

" No ; it seemed to strike him at last that I wasn't trying to humbug him. He got me to tell him the whole story again, but there was one thing over which he was as stubborn as a mule. He said it was only fair to himself that he should tell Alwing who the fellow was he'd seen wearing the King's School cap—meaning Ludmoor.

" I couldn't stir him an inch, but then old Maggie took an innings. ' You've caused enough trouble as 'tis, Reuben,' she said ; ' don't you go making an old nuisance of yourself, and so near Christmas time. You was a boy

yourself once, and the best thing you can do is to keep quiet. It wasn't as if the young gentleman was doing any harm. He was just a-looking on, same as you'd 'ave been doing when you was his age.' "

" I'll make Joan send Maggie one of her pin-cushions for a Christmas card," declared Hugh. " Well, did it soften Reuben's heart ? "

" For a time he kept harping on the same string, that Ludmoor shouldn't have run away ; then Maggie made him light his pipe, and he calmed down. He said he should hear in the morning if what I'd told him was true, and if he found that the two real culprits had been caught he'd let the matter drop so far as we were concerned. He wouldn't come to the school, and he'd tell Sprode there was no need to make any more fuss about meeting us on the level crossing."

" Jolly good ! " exclaimed Hugh with a look of relief, and marched on with a lighter step.

" Now I want to know how you got on," said Martin. " Did you have any trouble with these two fellows after I'd gone to fetch the policeman ? "

" No fear ; they knew that Craddock was more than a match for them both. We found out why they'd left the stable door unfastened, and it was simply because they'd burst it open the night they brought the car to Netherby, and the lock's been broken ever since. It seems that Shard knew all about motors, as he'd been employed for some time at a garage. He got the sack, but wouldn't tell us why."

" Perhaps he was found trying to alter the colour of one of the cars," suggested Martin.

" There was one thing rather amused me," Hugh continued. " Mr. Craddock asked them if they knew there had been a mascot on the car ? Bramble said I'd



"Don't you go making an old nuisance of yourself."

got it, and that he'd seen me showing it to a boy from the King's School."

"Then they knew it was a black cat?"

"Yes, they knew all about the mascot. They'd been looking at it just before they turned in at the Netherby gate; and later on, when they found it was missing, they decided it must have fallen off while they were coming up

the drive. They searched after you and I had cleared off with the aeroplane, but of course they couldn't find it, for the simple reason that I'd picked it up and taken it away."

"It's a wonder they were content to leave the car in that coach-house after they tumbled to it that some one was knocking about in the garden," said Martin.

"Oh, the way I scooted and shouted to you to sling your hook must have made them think that we were two guttersnipes prowling round to pinch any odd bits of timber for firewood. A couple of thieves who'd been scared off the premises weren't likely to come there again. There was no other place they could think of to hide the car, and after it had been there for a week they must have felt pretty safe."

Hugh took to the road to make way for a perambulator; then, as he stepped back on to the pavement, he burst out laughing.

"That beastly black cat came haunting me in my dreams. I thought it was alive, with a silver bell tied to its green ribbon. We were chasing it in a wood, where there were a lot of dangerous men hidden who we knew would pounce out on us if they heard a noise. I wonder what became of those ghost-hunters, and if they had any luck."

"I'll find out who they were," chuckled Martin. "If I can get hold of one of them, in a guarded sort of way I'll lead him on to tell me how that hunt ended."

Hugh grinned, then his face grew serious.

"We aren't out of the blessed wood yet," he growled.

"What, not out of Birchwood?"

"No, I'm thinking about those fellows Steel and Fawcett. If they start ragging Ludmoor, a lot of fellows are sure to hear what they are talking about, and the story will go all over the school."

"We'll stop that little game if we get on the ground soon enough," said Martin. "Come on—step out."

They quickened their pace, refusing to join company with Maple, who, as they swung past him, remarked that it was a fine day for the match. On reaching the King's School, Steel and Fawcett were discovered standing in the quad, with watchful eyes on the entrance gate. Martin marched up to them, and opened fire.

"I suppose you are waiting for Ludmoor, to ask if he made that rubbing last night?"

"What do you know about it?" asked Steel, with a look of astonishment.

"More than you do," replied Martin, and gave a hasty account of what had happened in the haunted cover.

"If Ludmoor had been caught trespassing in Birchwood, then you two fellows would have got in a jolly old row," he concluded. "You may be sure Ludmoor would have tried to put the blame on your shoulders for having egged him on to bring off this silly stunt. I can't think why you were such fools."

"I never thought he'd go," cried Steel. "I was expecting him to turn up with some such excuse as that he'd had toothache, and so couldn't venture out in the cold air."

"He'd never have done it if he'd had to go alone," said Fawcett. "That's where we thought we had him; and so we should have, if he'd kept to the agreement. I say, Denston, why on earth did you come butting in?"

"He found an envelope with some money in it which I'd lost not long ago," explained Hugh. "Last night he began badgering me with the old saying that 'one good turn deserves another.' He called me all kinds

of names till I said I'd go with him and help make that rubbing."

"That's just like Ludmoor," sneered Fawcett. "He'd play any mean trick when he found himself in a corner. I suppose we ought to have known he'd never keep his word."

"We said we'd present him with a trophy in the shape of a sugar pig if he'd make the rubbing," said Steel. "Well, we've bowled him out, because he didn't keep to the rules. I'm fed up with that chap's brag and swagger. It's time he was squashed, and I'll put it across him as soon as he comes inside this quad."

"Leave him alone," said Martin. "Ludmoor's down and out. He knows he's been shown up as an absolute rotter, and you may be sure he'll sing small in future."

"I'd like to make him sing—or howl."

"For goodness' sake don't start a rag. You may depend Ludmoor will hold his tongue, but if you two fellows aren't careful you'll get the whole lot of us into a row."

"Oh, all right," said Steel, after a moment's silence. "I shall just tell Ludmoor in private what I think of him, and there it'll end."

"What about the sugar pig?" asked Fawcett.

There was a laugh.

"I shall eat it myself," declared Steel. "No, I won't. Just to show there's no ill-feeling between us, if the Day-boys win the cup this afternoon I'll give it to you, Denston."

"Thanks," replied Hugh. "I'll have it stuffed, and keep it for a mascot. . . ."

CHAPTER XXIII

DAY-BOYS *v.* SCHOOLHOUSE

"HERE we are at last," chirped Joan, as she and Martin took up their stand beside the boundary ropes on the King's School playing-field. "I was afraid we should be late."

There was no sign yet of the rival Fifteens, but ranks of boys had lined up down both sides of the match-ground, all eager for the game to begin. The afternoon was bright and windless, and Russell, who had foretold a snowstorm accompanied by thunder and lightning, was now forced to own himself a failure as a weather prophet. The air was certainly electric, since the growing excitement of the last few days had culminated with an announcement made by Mr. Alwing at the close-of-work assembly.

"Some time ago it was believed that three boys belonging to this school had stopped a train by putting detonators on the line. I am glad to inform you that I have received a telephone message from the station-master that the persons responsible for that outrage are now in the hands of the police."

A few moments later the whole school poured out into the quad in a jubilant state of mind, boarders as well as day-boys, happy to think that their honour had at last been vindicated. Only one boy seemed dissatisfied, and he was Ludmoor. He had arrived at the

school just in time to be told by Martin that there was no longer any fear of fresh complaints from Priest ; then Steel had swooped down upon him, and in a few pungent sentences said what he thought of the previous night's escapade.

" You're a funk and a blooming windbag," had been Steel's parting shot. " Fawcett and I have promised Grane that we'll say nothing about it to the other fellows, and you'd better keep your mouth shut. Don't let us have any more of your swank, or you'll get it in the neck."

So, as soon as morning school ended, Ludmoor had hurried across the quad, glad to escape from the society of all honourable men. Fear of trouble for himself had kept him silent when he had it in his power to clear his comrades from a cloud of suspicion and disgrace. Then he might have won distinction, and in a worthy manner ; but now all hope of being regarded by his class-mates as the lion-hearted Ludmoor was gone for ever.

" Here they come," said Martin.

His words were followed by an outburst of cheering all round the ground as the two teams were seen streaming out of the pavilion, a rivulet of bright colours, the green-and-white of the Day-boys contrasting with the black-and-amber of the Schoolhouse. Great men were in that company, Winter and Cardwell, Torling and Barry, but for the moment Joan had eyes for one person only. The rank-and-file of the Day-boys all looked so much alike in their war-paint that it was difficult for her to distinguish one from another ; then a familiar gesture, the peculiar swing of a right arm, caught the girl's notice.

" There he is ! " she said. " There's Hugh."

The toss for choice of goals had been decided before

leaving the pavilion, and the rival teams lost no time in forming up in line of battle. On the turf between them lay the new yellow ball soon to become the object of so much desperate effort as each side strove for its possession. There was a moment of intense stillness, a shrill chirrup of the whistle, and the kick-off was followed by a roar of "Play up, Schoolhouse!" "Play up, Day-boys!" Then silence, as the spectators settled down to watch the game.

The Schoolhouse came on with a rush, as if from the start they meant to carry all before them, but Winter stemmed the attack with a long drop-kick which found touch far up the field.

"Mark your men!" was the cry as black-and-amber, green-and-white, lined up for the throw-in. Players sprang into the air as the ball came sailing in from the touch-line. There was a confused struggle which avalanched towards the centre of the ground; then the movement ceased, and the forwards packed quickly for the first scrum.

For several seconds after the ball had been placed, the dense mass gave no indication of the great effort which was being made; then with a powerful heave green-and-white gained a few inches of ground, and with it obtained possession of the ball. Back and back it was heeled, the last line of the pack stepped neatly over it, and the inside half pounced on the prize and passed it neatly to Barry.

There was a shout of "Played, Day-boys!" and Martin chuckled, "Good old Hugh!"

"I didn't see Hugh do anything," murmured Joan.

"He was in the scrum. Didn't you see how they pushed the Schoolhouse back? Well, Hugh did part of the shoving."

The Day-boys' success was but momentary; then the battle turned, and soon the Schoolhouse forwards were going strong, dribbling the ball, passing and re-passing along the advancing line—a deadly method of attack, and one which carried the game into their opponents' twenty-five before it was checked. Once more a good drop-kick turned the tide, and for a time the play hung in mid-field. One scrum followed another, determined efforts on the part of halves and three-quarters to break away resulting merely in the gain of a few yards, first in one direction, then in the other. Foolish optimists among the spectators, who had been counting on an easy victory for the side whose colours they displayed, now realized that it was going to be a grim struggle.

Joan watched the play with eager eyes, but with a slight feeling of disappointment. She had hoped to see Hugh performing all kinds of brilliant and gallant acts, instead of which there were long periods of time when she lost sight of him entirely. Once he was glimpsed in the welter of the fight hanging in an affectionate manner round some one's neck, then he disappeared. A few moments later, not far from where she and Martin were standing, a cluster of racing figures all seemed to come into violent collision. The shock left three players piled on one another in a heap, and, as they struggled to their feet, the undermost proved to be Hugh, who rose gasping for breath, and with one cheek plastered with mud. To Joan it seemed far from glorious; she had yet to learn the great truth of the rugby game so well expressed in the words of "Old International": "As long as a player forgets himself and remembers only the honour of his team, so long will he be a power to his side."

But there was plenty of excitement, one period of

which grew in intensity, and ended in a roar of voices which might have been heard a mile away. From hand to hand, in a series of well-timed passes, the ball reached Torling, outside three-quarter on the Schoolhouse left wing. He fielded it neatly while on the run, and the next moment was speeding along with the swiftness of a deer. On he went down the touch-line, swerving round a hostile half, and drawing the Day-boy defence; then when he seemed on the point of being surrounded, he cross-kicked the ball to the opposite wing. Renshaw secured it, rushed on till danger loomed ahead, then passed inwards, and three seconds later the ball had been grounded over the goal-line. The storm of cheering which greeted this Schoolhouse success subsided as Cardwell prepared to take the place-kick. The green-and-white jerseys fell back, and waited like hounds held in leash to rush forward as the ball touched the ground.

Drury, lying flat on the ground, held the treasure poised steadily above the mark, and with watchful eyes on his leader. "Right," called Cardwell. There was a thud, and the ball went sailing high over the heads of the charging Day-boys, over the crossbar, and between the lofty posts.

"Goal!"

But the green-and-whites were not downhearted, as could be seen by their faces as they lined up for the kick-off. The fact that a goal had been scored against them seemed only to act as a tonic, bracing them to go "all out" both in attack and defence. At it they went, and at last their efforts were rewarded, though it was all done so quickly as to leave Joan mystified until Martin explained what had happened.

A scrum had been formed close to the touch-line, the opposing three-quarters ranged in a slanting line across

the field waiting for a rush in the open. But Barry, the Day-boys' right-winger, hovered in a position some distance behind the pack, and close to the line. The shove commenced, and once more the Day-boys got possession of the ball, and heeled it back. Gough, the inside half, seized it and feinted to pass it to his brother half, who ran into the open. But Gough had the ball ; he ran round on the " blind-side," the narrow space between the scrum and the touch-line, while Barry came racing up behind him, and received a quick pass. On went Barry, going like the wind, and with the field clear before him. Once he swerved as the Schoolhouse full-back made a vain attempt to intercept him, and an instant later he was lying full length on the turf with the ball beneath his chest.

The Day-boys rewarded him with a hearty cheer, but the distance proved too great for the try to be converted into a goal, and at half-time the Schoolhouse had the lead by five points to three.

The combatants gathered in groups to refresh themselves with slices of lemon, and as Joan and Martin turned away from the ropes, the latter noticed a young man strolling along with his right hand swathed in a bandage.

" Just a minute," said Martin. " That's Joe Hooper ; I want to ask him something about my receiver."

Joan stood watching from a distance while her cousin made the inquiry. It was answered ; then apparently a question was asked as to how young Hooper came to be on the King's School playing-field instead of at his bench in Mr. Ludmoor's factory. Joe exhibited his bandaged hand, and the conversation continued. At first the young man seemed to be in an angry mood ; then his eyes twinkled, and his mouth expanded into a

grin. Martin laughed ; Joe had still more to say ; then they both laughed, and, when at last the conference ended, Martin returned to his cousin shaking with mirth.

" You seem to have been having a lot of fun about that receiver," said Joan. " What's the joke ? "

" Oh, it wasn't about the wireless," chuckled Martin. " He was explaining how he hurt his hand. I'll tell you sometime ; it's too long a story to begin now."

The whistle sounded as the last words were spoken, and the two cousins turned to see the kick-off. It is impossible to find space for a detailed account of the second half of the match, a game long to be remembered as one of the toughest ever fought out on the King's School playing-field. For a time the contest was of a give-and-take kind, then after a splendid round of quick passing between the Day-boys' three-quarters the ball was carried over their opponents' goal-line. Winter himself took the place-kick, and this time green-and-white scored a goal.

" Oh, good ! " cried Martin. " Now we've got the lead—three points ahead."

It might have seemed impossible for the game to become more strenuous than it had been all along, but so it did, the Schoolhouse now determined to recover the advantage they had lost, the Day-boys equally resolved to hold and if possible increase their lead. Once the fleet-footed Torling was brought down within three yards of the line, and later Barry seemed on the point of securing another try when he was collared by Cardwell. Up and down the field the battie swung, and Joan's eyes were no longer watching anxiously what Hugh was doing ; she was following the fortunes of the whole team, and more than once her heart warmed with

a glow of generous admiration for the courage and endurance of the Schoolhouse.

Time was passing, and the voices of the onlookers sank into a silence, broken only by the stamp of feet, breathless calls between the players, and the creaking of the boundary ropes as the crowd leaned forward with necks strained to watch the progress of some dash down the wing.

"Play up, Schoolhouse!" shouted Cardwell.

Then came a thrilling moment as a wave of black-and-amber broke into their opponents' twenty-five; there was a confused struggle, then Palmer, a Schoolhouse three-quarter, caught the ball neatly on the bound. It was all done in a flash; he dodged an opponent, and steadied himself for a drop-kick at goal. Then down he went, half strangled by a green-and-white arm flung round his neck; the ball slithered off his foot, was seized by Winter, and punted down the field.

"Played, Denston!" "Played, Winter!" roared a chorus of voices all hoarse with excitement.

"Hugh?" cried Joan, breathless. "They are shouting 'Played, Denston.'"

"Rather!" chortled Martin. "Didn't you see him go for that man? My hat! if he hadn't, Palmer would have dropped a goal. He's hot stuff is Palmer. Good old Hugh!"

No fresh addition was made by either side to the score, and when a prolonged blast of the whistle brought the match to an end the Day-boys were the winners by the narrow margin of eight points to five.

Now a big crowd gathered in front of the pavilion to see Winter receive the cup. It was presented to him by Mrs. Alwing; for though the mayor was present, he

had not come in his cocked hat and robes of office, but clad in a grey tweed suit such as any Old Boy might wear. There were cheers for the two teams and for Mrs. Alwing.

"Winter!—speech—spe-ech!" shouted the crowd.

The skipper grinned and shook his head, but the shouts only grew louder, then suddenly they ceased as it became evident that the object of this ovation had changed his mind.

"Thank you for your kindness," began Winter. "I'm glad the Day-boys won, but you other fellows needn't think you've lost the cup. It's still in the family, and what I'll ask you to do now is to give three cheers for us all—three cheers for the old school."

As the host of spectators drifted away, streaming through the entrance gate into the road, Joan and Martin lingered outside the pavilion into which Hugh had dived in search of his overcoat. He had played a ripping game; he had collared Palmer in the nick of time; Winter and Barry had both smacked him on the back and given him gruff words of praise. If there had ever been a moment in his life when he had an excuse to swagger, it was now.

Hugh came forth; he spied the waiting pair, and came towards them with a friendly grin.

"Hullo," said Hugh. "Well—that's *that*."

CHAPTER XXIV

A LAST SURPRISE

" I FEEL I should like to go home through the town," said Joan as they left the playing-field.

" Then you won't get me to go with you," said Hugh. " The shortest way is good enough for me. I want a jolly good bath before tea."

" Yes, you do want one badly," laughed Joan. " All the same, I should like for you, and I, and Martin to march through the town with a band playing in front of us to show the people who's won. . . ."

" They'll all know when the *Mercury* comes out on Friday," declared Martin. " I saw a reporter on the field."

" My dear sir," began Hugh, with a twinkle in his eye, " if we'd got those receivers of ours rigged up so that we could listen-in, you may depend we should hear the result of the match given out to-night as part of the sports news."

The mention of broadcasting reminded Joan of something, and she turned to her cousin.

" What were you and Joe Hooper laughing about at half-time when you went to speak to him about wireless ? "

" Oh, I don't suppose you'd think it funny," replied Martin evasively.

" Was Joe on the field ? " asked Hugh. " Why

wasn't he at work ? I thought he got his afternoon off on Saturday."

Martin made no reply ; he seemed suddenly to have gone deaf.

" I know why you won't tell me," laughed Joan. " It's something to do with what happened last night, and you think if you talk about it before me you'll be letting the cat out of the bag. Well, you won't ; because——"

" I told her myself," interrupted Hugh. " Oh yes, she knows, so you needn't mind talking before Joan, if that's your trouble. But I can't see what Joe Hooper has to do with that—that little trip of ours to Birchwood."

" He was one of the ghost-hunters."

" Never ! "

" He was," laughed Martin. " After I'd spoken to him about the wireless, I asked him why his hand was bandaged ; he said he'd cut it badly in the fitting shop at Ludmoor's factory this morning, and the doctor told him he couldn't go back to work till the wound was healed. He'd got a scratch all across his cheek, and I asked him if that had been done at the same time. At first he didn't seem inclined to answer the question, then he laughed and said he'd scratched his face tumbling through a hedge."

" I hope you aren't going to tell us he was drunk," said Joan.

" No, it happened last night when they were hunting for this ghost. Of course I didn't let out I knew anything about it, and he told me the whole story."

" Well, what happened to them ? " inquired Hugh eagerly. " That's just what I've been wanting to know."

"When I first heard about these ghost-hunters," began Martin, "I imagined there'd be a small army of them, but it seems there were only three—a fellow called Blake who is a brother of one of the girls who'd been scared, Joe Hooper, and a chap named Mossop. When they got to Birchwood they climbed over a gate into the cover, and crept along inside the hedge till they reached the gap through which this rascal had jumped out and frightened the girl cyclists."

"Did they find the ghost?" asked Joan eagerly.

"Not a sign of it. They searched the bushes round to see if any one was hiding, then Blake walked as far as the gate. As he came back he whistled, and Hooper replied 'Hullo!' thinking it was a call to arms; but all Blake had to say was that he'd looked up and down the road and there was nothing in sight."

"Yes, I heard that whistle," murmured Hugh. "It was just after we got to the monument."

"Well, these chaps settled down to wait, and to pass the time they told one another ghost tales. Mossop was in the middle of one about a headless woman when Blake, who was standing with his back to the road, declared he'd seen a light flashing in the heart of the cover. You remember how, when Ludmoor snatched that torch out of your hand, I told him not to flash it about?"

Hugh nodded.

"That's what it must have been. The ghost-hunters argued about this mysterious light for a few moments, then Blake and Joe Hooper set off to see if they could find out what it was. It's a wonder they didn't bag Ludmoor, but it's evident they never saw him. He must have been hidden by the shadow of the undergrowth when he turned and ran back."

"They'd have shouted if they'd spotted him," said Hugh. "Still, the way he dashed past us was enough to make you think there must be some one at his heels."

"It's a good thing we bolted," continued Martin. "Blake and Hooper came to the ride, and walked as far as the monument, but of course there was nobody to be seen. They hung about wondering if what Blake had seen was moonshine or some will-o'-the-wisp; then, as they couldn't find anything to account for it, they walked back to their post inside the hedge. Mossop had begun to feel a bit lonely, and he'd started a pipe to keep him company, as he said.

"They waited and waited, but nothing happened except one false alarm. An owl hooted in one of the trees on the opposite side of the road; Mossop stuck his pipe in his pocket, and they all three prepared to spring through the hedge, as they thought it must be the ghost trying his voice; then the bird hooted again, and they knew what it was. They began to pace up and down to keep themselves warm. All of a sudden Blake edged up to Joe Hooper, and asked in a low voice if he smelt anything. They both sniffed, and there certainly was a horrible smell coming from somewhere; Blake thought it was hair or fishbones burning, Joe said it was like a glue-pot boiling over on a gas ring. They stepped over to where Mossop was leaning against a tree and inquired if he'd noticed the smell, and he said he was just going to ask them the same question. The stench seemed to get worse, and they began to think that the 'ghost' was playing some trick on them with stink bombs. Then they suddenly discovered where the smell was coming from—Mossop was on fire."

"On fire!" gasped Joan. "How could he catch fire standing in a wood?"

"In the moment of excitement when the owl hooted, the silly ass had stuck his pipe in his pocket, and left it there. The burning ash had got out, and set his coat on fire. His rubber tobacco pouch was smouldering, and that's what made the frightful stink."

"Must have been like the hum we smelt all down the corridor when some ass put a bit of rubber on the stove in the Upper Fourth classroom," chuckled Hugh.

"These chaps were all so busy putting out Mossop's fire that they didn't notice a girl go past on a bicycle. She went on, riding rather slowly; then, if you please, when she'd nearly got past the wood, out jumped the blooming ghost with a frightful screech. That night he'd chosen to hide at the very end of the cover, instead of the place where Blake and the other two warriors expected to find him."

"What a shame!" cried Joan. "Was the poor girl badly scared?"

"The 'poor girl' hopped off the bicycle, made for the ghost, and gave it such a smack on the head that it went sprawling and screeched louder than ever. Then she yanked him off the ground, and smacked his head again."

"But a girl couldn't do that!" said Joan breathlessly.

"As a matter of fact, it wasn't a girl," laughed Martin. "It was a young fellow called Lomax, dressed up in some clothes he'd borrowed from his sister. He didn't know anything about the ghost-hunters and their plans, but he'd heard how these shop assistants had been waylaid; so, just before they started from Mear's, he set off himself in the hope he might draw the ghost, which he did."

"What about the three hunters?" asked Hugh.



*"The 'poor girl' hopped off the bicycle, and
made for the ghost."*

"As soon as they heard the screeching they charged out into the road, and it was when he was bursting wildly through the hedge that Joe fell, and got his face scratched by a thorn. By the time they reached the scene of action there wasn't any ghost left for them to catch. Lomax had torn off the white sheet, and kicked it into the ditch."

"And who was it?" cried Joan.

"Oh, it was a fellow from Hayley Cross who is half-witted, and no doubt thought his ghost performance a fine old joke. Well, he'd had a thrashing, and it was

no use handing the poor beggar over to the police, so Lomax and the other three hunters marched him back to Hayley Cross, handed him over to his relatives, and advised them to take more care of him in future."

"So they laid the ghost between them," laughed Hugh. "Ludmoor and I might have barged into them if it hadn't been for you, Martin."

Joan walked on with a light step, happy to think that another ghost had been laid—the fear which had been haunting her that the two boys would never recover their old happy friendship, and that there would always be bad blood between them.

"We won't talk about Birchwood any more," she decided. "Hugh, I think you might have come and spoken to me at half-time. All the time Martin was talking to Joe Hooper I was left standing all alone, and you didn't seem even to know I was there."

"I saw a big green-and-white rosette, but it never struck me that you were pinned on to the back of it," declared Hugh. "It's a pity you gave that wooden cat back to Mr. Craddock. If you'd brought it with you to the field, the Day-boys might have kicked at least half a dozen more goals."

"Oh, I don't believe that mascot was ever any good—not now I don't," said Joan. "All the luck it brought the Craddocks was that their car was stolen."

"But the cat helped us to get on the trail of the car, and to find it again," protested Martin solemnly.

"You may say what you like, but I don't believe that cat's a scrap of good to any one except as an ornament. I'm quite content that it should be returned to its rightful owners."

The conversation turned to wireless, and to the intention of both boys to start work on their receiving



"It's a living one!" she cried.

sets the first day of the holidays. They were still talking about valves and crystals when they reached Falcon Road.

"You are coming in to have tea with us, Martin," said Joan, seizing her cousin's arm as they arrived at the Denstons' front gate. "Oh yes, you are—you promised to join our celebrations if the Day-boys won the match."

When tea was over it seemed as if the excitements of the day had come to an end. But there was still a surprise in store for Joan. The three young folks were in the breakfast-room, examining some recent additions

to Hugh's stamp collection, when Sarah entered, carrying a small square basket.

"Mr. Craddock's just brought this for you, Miss Joan," she announced with a smile. "He wouldn't stay—said it was a present from himself and Mrs. Craddock."

"What can it be?" murmured Joan, as she took the basket and placed it on the table. "He's written something on this label tied to the handle—'Should auld acquaintance be forgot.' I wonder what that means?"

"It's some more chestnuts for you to send out to Mrs. Haywood to remind her of old friends in England," suggested Hugh.

"Better open it and see," said Martin.

Joan drew out the straight piece of stick which fastened the basket, then raised the lid. For an instant she gazed at the contents of the hamper with a look of blank astonishment, then her face shone with delight.

"It's a living one!" she cried. "Oh, you sweet thing!"

Out of the basket she lifted a black Persian kitten, and hugged it in her arms. The new arrival seemed glad to have escaped from its wickerwork prison. It purred, blinked its yellow eyes, and rubbed a little fluffy head against Joan's cheek.

"If it's the mascot come to life, he's left off all his clothes, and he'll catch cold," said Hugh. "I mean, he's lost his necktie."

The kitten mewed plaintively as if conscious of some defect in its appearance. Joan stared at it for a moment, then rushed out of the room.

"She's taken it upstairs," chuckled Hugh. "Means to put it to bed with a hot-water bottle, I suppose."

In five minutes Joan reappeared, and held up the

kitten, now adorned with a "necktie" of green-and-white ribbons.

"There," she said, "now he's properly dressed. I had just enough ribbon left to make a bow."

"Day-boy colours!" cried Martin. "His friends are my friends."

"And the more we are together," chanted Hugh, "the merrier we'll BE!"

THE END

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